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SOHL**

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MY KINGDOM FOR A NEWSSTAND!

No joke, chums—this is a real melancholy bit. Turning Pappy's spaceyacht into spacescrap is bad enough. Missing my date with that cute Venusian aaglechick is worse. But the downest part of all is, I may not get back home in time to buy the new INFINITY and SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES!

I dan't have ta tell yau how super INFINITY and SFA are. Or that I'll be a nawhere square without air if I miss an issue of either. Especially with the surprises they've gat coming up!

But I have nabady ta blame but my own self—I should have subscribed when I had the chance.

Readers, don't let this happen to you. Remember, monsters of distinction have subscriptions. See full details inside.

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 2 No. 3

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Illustrated by Bill Bowman

HUNT the SPACE-WITCH!

by IVAR JORGENSEN

*...Unless you find her, your blood-brother is lost
forever! But finding her is far worse than death!*



Hunt the Space - Witch !

by Ivar Jorgenson

CHAPTER I

IT WAS Barsac's second day on Glaurus, and the first moment of free time he had had since the ship had landed. Before that there had been the landing routines, the spaceport men to bribe, the inspectors to cajole, the jet alleys to scrub. But on the second day withered old Captain Jaspell called the men of the *Dywain* together and told them they might have five days' leave before departure.

Barsac smiled. He was a lean man, tall and well-muscled, with the chiselled scars of the Luaspar blood-rites fanning out radially from the edges of his thin lips. He was an Earther, thirty-nine years old; twenty of those thirty-nine years had been spent as a spaceman, the last eight as Second Fuelsman aboard Captain Jaspell's *Dywain*. He rose in the crowded cabin where the crew had assembled to hear Jaspell's words and said, "Captain, is that job on Repair Deck still open?"

Jaspell nodded. He was a desiccated Earther of a hun-

dred and three years, still keen of mind and iron of discipline. "You know it is, Barsac."

"And you're planning to fill the post while we stop over on Glaurus?"

"I am."

"I ask you to wait a day before publishing notice of the vacancy, then. I know a man on Glaurus who would fill your need. His name is Zigmunn. He's a Luaspar. He's my blood-brother, Captain."

"Bring him to me today or tomorrow," Jaspell said. "I can't wait any longer than that to find a replacement. Is he qualified?"

"I swear it."

"We shall see, Barsac. Bring him here."

AN HOUR LATER Barsac dismounted from the spaceport-to-city tube and found himself in the heart of the city of Millyaurr, oldest and greatest on Glaurus. It was a city of twenty-one million people and its population hailed from at least a hundred fifty worlds. Barsac found himself jostled

by scrawny blue dwarfs and fat gray-skinned Domrani patriarchs as he made his way down the ancient street. From the shops that lined the road came the smells of wine and raw meat, of newly baked bread and of festering cabbages.

Zigmunn had said in his letter that he lived now in the Street of Tears in the central residential zone of Millyaurr. Barsac paused to ask directions of a wizened old vender of stimulatubes, and cordially declined the offer of a tube at a large discount. He made his way forward.

It was ten years since he had last seen Zigmunn, though it did not seem that long. The Luasparru was an agile, quick-witted man who had formed a fine complement for Barsac's stolid massive strength, and they had hit it off immediately when they shipped off Vuorrleg together more than a decade back. The ship they were on was making a stop at Luaspar, Zigmunn's home-world; Barsac had gone to the home of Zigmunn's cognate kin and there they had gone through the agonizing Luaspar rites of blood-fealty, bound to each other in friendship forever by the scars that lined their lips.

Then they had left Luaspar

and gone on. And they had stopped for a while on Glaurus a year later, and became separated in a bar-room brawl, and Barsac had returned to the ship alone, without his blood-brother. The ship had blasted off without him. At his next port, Barsac found a letter waiting for him from Zigmunn; the Luasparru, stranded, had been unable to get a berth on any other ship out of Glaurus, and was biding his time, waiting for an offer.

Shortly after Barsac transferred into Jaspell's ship, the *Dywain*, and wrote to Zigmunn to tell him where he was; the Luasparru replied he was still stranded, but had high hopes of returning to space soon.

Eight years went by, and Zigmunn's letters became less frequent as no sign of a berth materialized, and finally Barsac learned that the *Dywain* was due to visit Glaurus as part of a journey out to the Rim. Then came word that the *Dywain* would be taking on an additional crewman on Glaurus, and Barsac rejoiced at the thought of being reunited with the Luasparru after so long.

The glowing placard against the side of a weathered old building read: *Street of Tears*. Zigmunn lived at number

eighty-one in the Street of Tears. Barsac looked for a house-number.

He found one: thirty-six. He crossed the street, which was narrow and reeked of the garbage of millennia, and headed up the cracked and blistered pavement. It was long ages since the slidewalk had functioned in the Street of Tears; probably the underground mechanisms had rusted into decay centuries ago, and the inhabitants had simply stripped away the metal of the slidewalk and sold it for scrap, leaving the naked concrete exposed beneath. The buildings loomed high, blotting out the golden light of Glaurus' sun.

Sixty-nine, seventy-one, seventy-three. Barsac crossed another street. He swore. Had Zigmunn been living in this filth for eight years?

Seventy - seven. Seventy - nine.

Eighty-one.

THE STREET was crowded; aliens of all descriptions, swaggering native-born Glaurans, even a few curious folk who wore silver reflecting-masks that obscured all of their faces but their eyes and who walked in solitary grandeur, alone and given a wide

berth by others on the street. Barsac turned his attention toward the house.

It was old and weary-looking, a drab place of crumbling yellow brick. He went in. A directory in the dingy lobby yielded the information that Zigmunn lived on the third floor, room 32-A. There was no sign of a liftshaft; Barsac took the creaking stairs.

He knocked once at the door of 32-A before he noticed that a shutter had been drawn across it and a gleaming lock affixed. Dust stippled the lock and the shutter; both had been in place more than a little while.

Barsac turned. He pounded on the door of 33-A, and after a moment it opened, hesitantly.

"I'm looking for Zigmunn the Luasparru," he said.

He faced a tiny gnome of a woman who gaped toothlessly at him in confusion. She wore a mildew-flecked wrap that had probably been the height of fashion seventy or eighty years before, on some other world.

"Who?"

"Zigmunn of Luaspar. The man who lived or lives in the room next to yours." He pointed. "A very thin man about my height, with bronze skin and scars around his lips. Scars

like these." He bent close, showing her.

"Oh. Him. He went away. Two, three, maybe four weeks ago. Hasn't been back since. Would you stop in for tea with me? A young man like you must be very thirsty."

"No, thanks. Three or four weeks ago? Did he say where he was going?"

She giggled shrilly. "Not to me. But he wasn't fooling anybody. Him with all that drinking and his women and the noise and knives, there was only one place *he* would decide he wanted to go, don't you know?"

"I don't know. Where?"

Again the giggle, oddly girlish. "Oh, *you* know. I can't say. It really isn't right."

"Where?" Barsac demanded again, loudly this time. His voice seemed to stir up eddies of dust in the darkened hallway.

"Really, I—"

The door of 34-A popped open suddenly and a fierce-looking Dlarochrene stuck his wattled head out and snapped, "What's all the noise out here? Get back in your room, old fossil. Who are you? What do you want?"

"I'm looking for Zigmunn of Luaspar," Barsac said stonily as the old woman slammed shut her door and threw the

bolt. "He's a friend of mine. I'd like to find him."

"The Luasparru hasn't been here for weeks."

"That's what the old lady told me. I want to know where he's gone."

"You mean you can't guess?"

"I'm a spacer. I haven't been on Glaurus in nine or ten years. I don't know anything much about this planet."

"I suggest you find out, then. And if you're a friend of *his*, I don't want to talk to you. Go downstairs to the bar. You'll find some of his friends there. They'll tell you where he is."

The door shut abruptly.

BARSAC STARED at the peeling wood a moment, then turned away, wondering what all this meant, what Zigmunn had done, where he was now. Questions were piling up rapidly. Barsac did not care for complications.

The bar was on street level, a dark low-ceilinged hovel that stank of stale beer. Barsac peered in; five or six habitués sat slumped at crude little wooden tables, and an Earthman bartender waited boredly behind his bar. With elaborate casualness Barsac sauntered in.

He spun a Galactic unit on the dull surface of the bar and asked for a drink. Lazily the bartender poured it, spilling half. Barsac smiled and drained the glass.

"Give me another," he said. "And make it full measure or I'll split your throat."

He put another coin next to the first one. Without responding the bartender poured him another, this time filling the glass to the brim. Again Barsac drained it in a gulp. Then he leaned forward, stared bluntly into the cold flat eyes of the barkeep, and said in a low voice, "I'm looking for a man named Zigmunn, a Luasparru. Know where he might be?"

Unsmilingly the barkeep pointed across the dark room to a figure slumped at a far table.

"Ask her."

"Thanks," Barsac said. "I will."

He crossed the bar-room to the girl's table, pulled out the chair opposite hers, and sat down. She looked up as he did so, but the glance she gave him was without any interest or curiosity; she simply looked at him because he was there, not because she cared about him.

"Buy me a drink," she said tonelessly.

"Later. I want to talk to you first."

"I don't talk to people. Buy me a drink. My room's on the fourth floor if you're looking for sport. If you just want to humiliate me, don't bother. It can't be done. Better men than you have tried."

He looked at her strangely. She was young—eighteen, maybe, twenty at most, and she was either an Earther herself or else mainly of Earther descent. Her corn-yellow hair fell carelessly over her shoulders; she wore a faded cling-on sweater that wrapped itself skin-tight against her slender body and in Zwihih style was cut to leave the nipples of her breasts bare. Her throat and face were dark in color, but whether it was from suntan or dirt Barsac could not tell. Her eyes were not the eyes of a girl of eighteen; they looked older than those of the woman he had seen upstairs.

"I guess I'd better buy you a drink," Barsac said. He held up two fingers to the watching barkeep.

This time he sipped his drink; she gulped hers, but showed no animation afterward. Gently he said, "My name is Barsac. Ever hear it before?"

"No. Should I have?"

"I thought a friend of

mine might have mentioned it to you sometime. A friend named Zigmunn."

"What do you know of Zigmunn?" Her voice was flat and empty; it seemed to come from just back of her teeth, not out of her chest.

"I'm his blood-kin. You see the scars around my lips? Zigmunn has them too."

"*Had* them. Zigmunn has no face at all by now."

Barsac's hands gripped the ragged wood of the table tightly. "What do you mean by that?"

For the first time the girl smiled. "Do you want me to tell you? Really?"

"I want to know where Zigmunn is."

"He isn't on Glaurus right now, that's for sure. I'm thirsty again."

"You'll get your other drink when you tell me where he is. If he isn't on Glaurus, where is he?"

"Azonda," she said.

Barsac blinked. Azonda was the eleventh planet of the system to which Glaurus belonged; Barsac cast back in his memory and recalled that the planet was without an atmosphere and so far from its sun that it was virtually without light as well—a cold, dead world. The thought came to him then that the girl must

be either drunk or insane. "Azonda?"

She nodded. "He left three weeks ago. He and I had a little party the night before he left. And then he left. For Azonda."

Frowning, Barsac asked, "What in the name of space would he do on Azonda?"

She looked oddly at him. "You mean that, don't you? You're perfectly sincere? No. You want to tease me. Well, I won't be teased." Her eyes, which for a moment had come alive, lapsed back to their former brooding deadness, and she let her shoulders sag.

He grasped her arm. "I'm a stranger on Glaurus. I *don't* know about Azonda. And I want to find Zigmunn. There's a berth open on my ship for him, if he wants it. We're leaving in five days for the Rim stars. Tell me: what's he doing on Azonda? Or is this a joke?"

Quietly she said, "You came three weeks too late, if you have a ship's berth for him. Forget about Zigmunn. Go back to your ship and stop looking for him."

He squeezed her arm mercilessly. "Will you tell me where he is?"

She paled under his grip, and he released her. "One more drink," she pleaded.

Barsac shrugged and ordered the drink for her; none for himself. She tossed it down and said slowly, "Azonda is the headquarters for the Cult of the Witch. Three weeks ago Zigmunn joined the Cult. I was invited to join but I turned it down—because I haven't fallen quite that low yet. Yet. Anyway, he joined. He's on Azonda right now, undergoing initiation. And worshipping the Witch. I don't want to talk about these things down here. If you want more information, come upstairs to my room."

CHAPTER II

IT WAS a small room, well-kept and clean despite the great age of the building. There was little furniture: a cheap chair, a writing-desk, a vidset, and a bed wide enough for two. Barsac followed her through the door numbly, thinking of Zigmunn and wondering what iniquity the Luasparru had fallen into now.

She switched on the light; it was dim and uncertain. She locked the door. Gesturing for him to take the chair, she sprawled down on the bed. She hiked her flowing skirt up to her thighs, crossed her legs, and stared expectantly at him.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Kassa Jidrill, and I'm a party girl with a free permit. It's the best sort of work a girl can get these days, if you have a liking for the work. I don't, but I get along . . . sometimes. My mother was an Earther. Now you know all that's worth knowing about me."

He studied her. Her legs were slim and well turned, and some of the deep despair of a few moments before had left her. But he had not come to Millyaurr to play with party girls.

He said, "I'm looking for Zigmunn. You say he's on Azonda. Would you swear to it?"

"I'd swear by my chastity," she said acidly. "I told you he was there—prancing and dancing around the Witch, no doubt. Believe me or not, as you choose."

His jaws tightened. "How can I get to Azonda, then?"

"You can't. At least no certified spaceline will take you there. You might try hiring a jackrogue spacer to ferry you there. Or you could join the Cult and get a free passage, but that's a little drastic. Save your money and your time. There's no way out of the Cult once you're in."

Rising, Barsac came toward her and sat on the edge of the

bed. "Zigmunnn and I are blood-kin. We've been separated ten years. I don't care what filth he's been forced to wallow in; I'm going to bring him out."

"Noble aims. But foolish."

"Perhaps so." He laid one hand on her bare thigh; it felt cool to the touch. "I need help, though. I have only five days on Glaurus and the world is strange to me. I need someone to explain things to me."

"And I'm nominated, eh?"

"You knew Zigmunnn. You could help."

She yawned. "If I wanted to. But the Cult's a dangerous proposition. Go downstairs and buy a bottle; then come back. Forget Zigmunnn. He's as good as dead."

"No!"

"No?" She shrugged lightly. "Have it your way, then. You're a strong and a stubborn man, Barsac. As much of an opposite to Zigmunnn as anyone could imagine."

"How can I get to Azonda?"

"Forget Zigmunnn," she crooned. She twisted sharply and toppled toward him, grasping his shoulders tightly in her arms, pulling him toward her. Her pale blonde hair tumbled in his eyes; it smelled of a sweet oil.

"No," he said suddenly, and rose.

For an instant anger and hatred glared in Kassa's eyes; then she softened. "Another failure, I see. In these times it's hard for a party girl to earn her keep; the men prefer to chase around in quest of dissolute blood-brothers. Very well, then. I'll take you to Lord Carnothute."

"Who?"

"The Governor of Millyaurr Province."

"How could he help me?" Barsac asked.

Her voice dropped to a barely audible whisper. "He is also a ranking official of the Cult, though few know it. Most Cult members wear the silver mask that hides their face, to symbolize the facelessness of the Witch. Lord Carnothute has special privilege, because of his rank. He was the agent who offered Cult-hood to Zigmunnn and to me, one night that he spent here. Perhaps he could tell you where your blood-brother is. Maybe Zigmunnn hasn't been sent to Azonda yet; they don't always leave right away. And in that case there's still a chance for him."

THE GOVERNOR'S PALACE was an airy pencil of a building far to the north of the Street of Tears; it took Bar-

sac and Kassa more than an hour by aircab to get there, and cost him twelve Galactic units.

She had shed her party-girl costume and was wearing something more demure, a black silk dress and veil; quite unconcernedly she had stripped to the buff and changed with Barsac in the room, and he had eyed her body with interest but not with desire. He had long ago learned to channel his energies, and now the finding of Zigmunn occupied center stage in his mind; all else was inconsequential to him.

The air was cleaner in the district of Millyaurr they now entered. They approached the Palace gate. Barsac noticed figures in the silvery mask of the Cult moving through the streets, always alone.

They entered. Kassa spoke briefly to a guard. They were conducted through an antechamber, down a broad and well-lit corridor, and into a liftshaft.

"He gave me a password I could use any time I wanted to come to him," Kassa explained. "Ordinarily it's not easy to get to see him."

The liftshaft opened; they stepped out. Immediately Kassa threw herself to the ground in a forehead-to-floor

genuflection; Barsac remained erect, staring at the man who faced them.

He was tall, nearly seven feet in height, and correspondingly broad. He wore a ruffle of chocolate-colored lace, a skin-tight tunic, a bright sash of emerald-studded platinum. His hair was artificially silvered and glinted metallicly; his eyes, too, were silvered. He smiled, but there was little warmth in the smile.

Kassa rose and spoke the word she had said to the guard before. Lord Carnothute frowned a moment, then smiled again and said in a rumbling voice, "You are the girl Kassa. Who is your friend?"

"My name is Barsac. I'm a spacer in off the *Dywain*, that put down here yesterday."

The governor led them to a smaller, intricately-furnished room within, and Barsac suddenly found himself holding a crystal flask of liquor. He touched it to his lips; it was sweet, but promised to be explosively potent.

Kassa said, "He came to me this morning about the Luasparru Zigmunn."

Immediately shadows crossed Carnothute's massive calm face. "You refused the offer, Kassa. Zigmunn is no longer concern of his or yours."

"He was—*is*—blood-kin of mine," Barsac said thickly. "I want to find him. There's a job waiting for him on my ship, the *Dywain*."

"And how could I help you find him, my good man?"

Barsac glowered unblinkingly at the ponderous nobleman. "Kassa has told me about what has happened to Zigmunn—and of your connection with the organization to which he now belongs."

Kassa gasped. Carnothute scowled briefly, but merely said, "Go on."

"I don't know anything about this Cult," Barsac said. "I don't have any moral objections to it, and I don't give a damn who belongs to it or what sort of foul rites may be involved. I'm only interested in Zigmunn. The blood tie is a strong one. I didn't do this to my face without thinking about it a couple of times first. I want to know where he is, and if he's still on Glaurus I want to be allowed to see him and tell him there's a berth available for him on the *Dywain* if he claims it this week."

Carnothute steepled his thick fingers. He showed no sign of displeasure, none of anger, but Barsac had had experience with men of his size before; they held their anger in check for fear of crushing

the smaller creatures who lived in the world, but when their rage exploded it was a fearful thing. Slowly the governor said, "Your blood-brother is not on Glaurus."

Kassa shot a quick meaningful glance at Barsac. *I told you so*, she seemed to be telling him, but he chose to ignore it.

"Where is he, then?"

"He left for Azonda fifteen days ago with the most recent group of initiates to our—ah—organization."

"And how can I get to Azonda, then?"

"There is no way."

Barsac let those words soak in for a moment, while he finished off the drink Carnothute had given him. The governor seemed oppressively big, smug on account of his size. Barsac found himself longing to slip a knife between the ribs of that great frame.

At length he said, "How long will it be before he returns to Glaurus?"

"Perhaps never. Or, again, perhaps tomorrow. The novitiate lasts a year on Azonda; after that he is free to go where he wishes, so long as he maintains his loyalty. There is a mask that is normally worn, too. Cult members rarely bother to conceal the fact of their membership, unless

there are reasons that make such concealment necessary."

"Such as being governor of a big province of Glaurus?" Barsac said sharply.

Carnothute let the thrust slide away. "Exactly. Now, unless there's anything further either of you wishes to take up with me—"

"I want to reach Zigmunn. Send me to Azonda, Carnothute. If I could speak to him—"

"It is forbidden to interfere with the rite of initiation, Barsac. And even if you were to join the Cult yourself you would have to wait some months before you were judged ready to move on to Azonda. You are obstinate to the point of monomania, Barsac. But I tell you you'll only bring about your death if you insist on following this present course. You are dismissed."

IN THE STREET, outside the Palace, they stood together a moment in the gathering shadows of late afternoon. Fleecy clouds now filled the darkening sky, and the faint tracings of the triple moons appeared behind them; the sun, sinking, was swollen against the horizon, and the gold of its rays had turned to crab-red.

"You fool," Kassa said quietly. "Blundering in there and accusing him of this and that, and mentioning the Cult and his connection with it like that!"

"What was I supposed to do? Crawl on my face and beg him to give me back Zigmunn?"

"Don't you know that crawling helps? Carnothute has ruled this province thirty years. He's accustomed to crawlers. But we need a more subtle approach."

"What do you suggest, then?"

She drew a paper from her pouch and scribbled a name and an address on it. "This man will take you to the place where you can try to buy passage to Azonda. How much money do you have?"

"Eleven hundred Galactic units."

She sucked her breath in sharply. "Don't offer more than five hundred for passage. And see that you save a hundred for me; I'm not doing all this for charity, Barsac."

He smiled and touched her chin. He understood frankness and appreciated it. Perhaps, he thought, he might give her a chance to earn her hundred in another way, after he found Zigmunn.

The address was in the

Street of Kings. Barsac pocketed the slip.

"What will you do while I'm there?"

"I'm going to go back to see Carnothute again. Possibly the governor's in need of a woman; I'll offer myself. I could ask him to have your blood-kin disqualified from his novitiate and returned to Glaurus; he can do that, you know, if he feels a candidate's unfit. Maybe it will work. Many promises can be exacted in bed by one who knows how."

"And where will I meet you later?"

"In my room. Here's the key; you'll probably get back there before I do. Wait for me. And don't let them cheat you, Barsac. Be careful."

She turned and dodged back toward the Palace entrance. Barsac watched her go; then he grinned and turned away. The Street of Kings next, he thought.

IT TURNED OUT to be considerably less impressive than its regal name promised; perhaps in centuries past it had been a showplace of Millyaurr, but now it was hardly preferable to the Street of Tears. Night was gathering close by the time Barsac reached the street.

He sought out his man:

Dollin Sporeffien of number five-sixty, Street of Kings. Sporeffien turned out to be a chubby little man in his late sixties, totally bald but for a fuzz of white about his ears. He looked harmless enough, except for his eyes. They were not harmless eyes.

He looked bleakly at Barsac, eyeing him up and down, and said finally, "So you're Kassa's latest lover, eh? She always sends them to me for some favor or other. She's a nimble girl, isn't she? She could be one of the best, if she put her mind to it. But she won't. She refuses to live up to her potential, as you've probably found out some nights, young one."

Barsac did not try to deny anything. He said, "I want a man who'll take me to Azonda tonight."

Instantly the joviality left Sporeffien's face. "Some favors are harder to do than others."

"I'll pay for it. Well."

"How well?"

"Find me the man," Barsac said. "I'll talk price with him, not you."

Sporeffien smiled dubiously. "It might cost you some hundreds of credits. Are you still interested?"

"Yes."

"Come with me, then."

Sporeffien led him out of the house and into the street; by now the stars were visible above the murk and haze of the city. They entered another house in which a man sat clutching a jug of wine and staring blearily at the small child that lay sleeping on a bed of filth in one corner of the room.

Sporeffien said, "Barsac, meet Emmeri. Emmeri, Barsac. Emmeri's a private conveyance man. He owns a small ship—somewhat outdated, but it still operates. Barsac would like you to pilot him to Azonda tonight, Emmeri."

The man named Emmeri turned and looked coldly at Barsac. He put down the jug.

"To Azonda?"

"You heard him. What's the price?"

Emmeri's blood-shot eyes drooped shut an instant; when he opened them, they gleamed craftily. "How much can you pay?"

"Five hundred Galactic units," Barsac said clearly. "I won't haggle. I'm starting right off at my top price, and that's as high as I'll go."

"Five hundred," Emmeri repeated, half to himself. "A very interesting sum. When do I get it?"

"When we've made the round trip to Azonda."

"No," Emmeri said. "Payment in advance or no trip. I don't know what you want to do on Azonda, but I want the money before we blast off."

Barsac thought about it half an instant, and said at length, "Done. Get yourself ready. I want to blast off this evening. I just have to get in touch with Kassa and then I'll be ready."

Shrugging, Emmeri got to his feet and weaved unsteadily across the room to the washstand. He didn't look much like a trained pilot, Barsac thought. His fingers shook and his eyes were bleary and he showed no signs of having the quick reflexes the job demanded.

But that didn't matter. All that mattered was getting a ship. He could compute his own orbit out to Azonda if he needed to.

Emmeri turned. "You have the money with you?"

Barsac nodded. He added, "You get it when I see your spaceship, not before. I don't hand five hundred units over to any foul-smelling sot who claims to be a pilot."

"You think I'd cheat you?" Emmeri said.

"I don't think anything. I just don't like to waste money."

"In that case you came to

the wrong place," Emmeri said smirkingly.

To his dismay Barsac realized he had lost sight of Sporeffien; the older man had ducked behind him, into the shadows. Too late he saw that he had been maneuvered into a trap; he started to turn, but Sporeffien was even quicker, and brought the jug of wine down against his head with a resounding impact.

Barsac reeled and took two wobbly steps forward. He saw the still unbroken jug lift again, and tried to shield his head; Sporeffien crashed it down against the back of his neck, rattling his teeth.

Barsac pitched forward. He heard harsh laughter, and the old man's dry voice saying, "Anyone but a greenhorn should have known nobody would ferry him to Azonda for a million units cash down in initiation-time. Let's go through his pockets, Emmeri."

CHAPTER III

HE WOKE to the sound of falling rain, clattering against the eaves of the houses and the stones of the street, and wondered for a moment how there could be rain aboard the *Dywain*. Then he remembered he was not aboard the *Dywain*. A moment later he

made the unpleasant discovery that he was lying face down in the gutter, one hand dangling in a fast-flowing rivulet of rain-water, and that he was soaking wet, encrusted with mud, and suffering from a splitting headache. The gray light of dawn illuminated the scene. He looked around. It was an unfamiliar street.

Slowly he got to his feet, feeling chilled and dazed, and brushed some of the street-mud from his clothes ineffectually. He shook his head, trying to clear it, trying to make the ringing in his ears cease.

His left thigh felt strange. A moment after he knew why: the familiar bulk of his wallet no longer pressed against it. He remembered now the scene of the night before, and reddened. Those two thieves had cleaned him out. Played him for a fool, slugged him, taken his wallet and his eleven hundred units and his papers.

They had left him with a key, though. He stared at it dully until he realized it was the key to the apartment of Kassa Jidril.

Kassa. She had sent him to Sporeffien. She must have known how laughable was the idea of hiring a ferry to take him to Azonda. And so she must have deliberately sent him to Sporeffien knowing

he would be worked over.

Angry as he was, he found it hard to blame her, or Sporeffien and his accomplice. This was a tough, hard world; a greenhorn with a thousand Galactic units or so in his wallet was fair game.

Only—Kassa had said she was going to return to Lord Carnothute and make a second attempt to get Zigmunn released from his Cult vows. Had she meant it? Or had that just been part of the deception?

Barsac did not know. But he decided to return to the girl's apartment, as long as he still had the key. He wanted to ask her a few questions.

The early-morning rain still poured down. He shivered, soaked through. The streets were deserted. He started to walk. A street-sign said, *Boulevard of the Sun*. He had no idea where that might be in relation to the Street of Tears.

He rounded a corner and entered a narrow winding street lined with hunchbacked old houses that leaned so close together above the street that little rain penetrated. Half-way down the street he spied the radiant globe of a winehouse, still open. And a man was leaving it. Barsac hoped he was sober enough to give him directions.

He hailed him. The man paused, turned, stared uncertainly at Barsac. He was a short man, thin, with a sallow pockmarked face framing a massive hooked nose. He wore iridescent tights of red and green and a dull violet cloak. His eyes were small and glinted brightly. He looked none the worse for his night's carouse.

"Pardon me," Barsac said. "Could you direct me to the Street of Tears?"

"I could. Directly ahead until you reach the Square of the Fathers—you'll know it by the big ugly clump of statuary in the middle—and then make a sharp right past the Mercury Winehouse. Street of Tears is four blocks along that way. Got it?"

"Thanks," Barsac said. He started to move on.

"Just a second," the other called after him. The Earther turned. "Are you all right?"

"Could be better," Barsac said shortly.

"You're all wet. And muddy. You've been beaten and robbed, haven't you?"

Barsac nodded.

"And you're a stranger, too. Need some money?"

"I can manage."

The small man took three steps and placed himself at Barsac's side, looking up at



him. "I know what it's like to be a stranger on Glaurus. I've been through it myself. I can help you. I can find you a job."

Barsac shook his head. "Appreciation. But I'm a spacer; my ship lifts at the end of this week. I'm not looking for a job."

"Many's the spacer who's been left behind. If you get into trouble, come to me. Here's my card."

Barsac took it. It said, *Erpad Ystilog, Exhibitor of Curiosities, 1123 Street of Liars*. Barsac smiled and pocketed it.

"I'll wish you a good morning," Ystilog said. "Do you remember the way to the street you seek?"

"Straight ahead to the Square of the Fathers, sharp right at the Mercury Winehouse and four blocks farther."

Ystilog nodded approvingly. "You remember well, spacer. If you're ever in need of a job, come to me."

"I'll think about it," Barsac said.

THE RAIN had virtually stopped by the time he reached the Street of Tears; only a trickle of drops came down now, and the sky had turned

pearl gray and was on its way toward brightening. A filmy rainbow arched across the rooftops of the city, gauzy, tenuous, already melting away as the heat of morning descended.

But number eighty-one still seemed wrapped in sleep. Barsac mounted the stairs two at a time, pausing on the fourth-floor landing to draw out the key Kassa Jidrill had given him the night before.

But he did not need the key.

The door had been broken in. It was as if a battering-ram had crashed against it an inch or two from the place where the hinges joined the door-frame, and the wood had crumpled inward like a folding screen. The hall and the room both were dark. Frowning, Barsac nudged open the fragments of the door, pushing past the shattered door into the room.

He switched on the light. A moment later he found himself fighting the temptation to switch it off again.

Kassa lay neatly arranged on the bed, and the coverlet was soaked with blood. Barsac had seen horrible deaths before; this one took the prize.

She had been sliced open. A double-barred cross had been slashed into her body, the downstroke beginning be-

tween the breasts and continuing to the pelvis, the two crossbars incised about eight inches apart in her stomach. Her throat had been cut. And her face—

There was hardly a face left.

The clothes she had worn last night were stacked on the chair. A key lay on the floor near the bed. He picked it up; it was a duplicate of the one she had given him.

She had come home, then; she had locked the door. And someone had broken in.

Barsac found his hands quivering. He turned away, shaking his head slowly, and closed what was left of the door behind him.

There was a public communicator booth in the hall. Barsac entered the booth without bothering to flip the shutter release, and depressed the *call* stud.

He said, "Give me the police. I want to report a murder, operator."

A moment later a sleepy voice said, "Millyaurr Homicide Detail. Lieutenant Hassliq speaking. What is it?"

"A murder, Lieutenant. In the Street of Tears, number eighty-one. The dead person is a party girl named Kassa Jidrill. I just found her."

There was no increase of

animation in Lieutenant Hassliq's voice as he said, "And who are you, please?"

"I'm a spacer in town on leave from the ship *Dywain*. My name is Barsac. I—met the dead girl yesterday afternoon for the first time. I just came back to her room now and found her this way."

"Describe the condition of the body, please."

Barsac did, in detail. When he was finished Hassliq said, "I feared as much. All right, Barsac—we'll send a morgue truck right over to pick up the body. You don't need to stick around if you don't want to."

"Won't you want to question me for the investigation?"

"What investigation?"

Barsac blinked. "A girl's been murdered. Don't you usually investigate murder cases in Millyaurr?"

"Not when they're Cult jobs," Hassliq said. "What's the use? That party girl was killed ritualistically, if your description is accurate. Someone in the Cult took a dislike to her. But what can we do? It's next to impossible to regulate Cult activities; I'd only be begging to have my own face scraped off and a double-barred cross cut into *my* belly. No, thanks. We'll send a pickup man out for the body."

Thanks for phoning in the information, Mr. Barsac."

He heard a click, stared at the receiver a moment, and hung up. They weren't even interested in finding Kassa's murderer, he thought. They didn't care. They were *afraid* to care.

HE WENT BACK to the room and sat by the dead girl until the morgue truck arrived. His quest for Zigmunn was taking on new colors; a robbery, now a murder had been woven into the pattern.

A ritualistic murder. A Cult murder. On Glaurus the Cult was law, it seemed. His heart felt curiously leaden; he avoided looking at the body on the bed. For Kassa all despair was ended now, suddenly, earlier than she had expected.

Half an hour passed; forty-five minutes. The rain began again, then stopped. Finally the truck arrived. Barsac heard the commotion on the stairs as the other boarders in the house, their curiosities aroused by the presence of the truck, followed the morgue men upstairs.

"In here," Barsac called.

Two bored-looking men with a stretcher slung between them entered. At the

sight of Kassa they winced.

"We get half a dozen of these a week," one said. "The Cult keeps a sharp knife."

They loaded her on the stretcher as if she were so much slaughtered meat. Barsac stepped forward and said, "What's going to happen to her body now?"

"She gets taken down to the morgue and entered. We wait a week for the body to be claimed. Then we send her to the crematorium."

"You don't expect anyone to claim the body?"

The stretcher-bearer smiled scornfully. "She was a party girl, wasn't she?"

"Besides," said the other one, "even if she was a nun of the Grand Temple. Nobody claims Cult victims' bodies. It isn't a healthy thing to do."

Barsac scowled. "I'd like to see her get a decent burial. She was, well, a friend of mine."

"Burial on Glaurus costs five hundred units, brother. Plus bribes. Was she that much of a friend? Don't throw your money away; she won't ever know the difference."

They smiled at him ghoulishly and lifted the stretcher. Barsac let them take her away. He was remembering that he had no money at all, and in four days he was due to re-

turn to his ship and leave Glaurus probably forever.

On sudden inspiration he yanked open the drawers of the dead girl's dresser. Cheap trinkets, souvenirs, cosmetics—ah—ten crumpled five-unit bills. The price for a night, he thought.

Coldly he pocketed the bills. Turning, he saw a thin-faced old man staring at him.

"Here, you! No robbery, here! That money belongs to me!"

"Who the devil are you?" Barsac asked.

"The landlord here. It's the rule; if a boarder dies intestate, I inherit. Hand over that money, right here and now."

"I need it," Barsac said. "You don't. The girl doesn't. Get out of my way."

He slammed the landlord against the greasy wall with a contemptuous slap of his flattened hand and made his way down the stairs and out into the Street of Tears, thinking of a dead party girl who would have been alive at this moment had he never come to Millyaurr.

IT WAS NEARLY NOON when he arrived at the field where the *Dywain* stood, and he was dizzy with hunger. He showed

his identity bracelet to the field guards and trotted out to the great ship.

Captain Jaspell was supervising the repainting of the stabilizer fins, up on D deck. Barsac waited until the captain had finished his harangue of the painters, then said, "Sir?"

"Oh—Barsac. Where's that ace repairman of yours?"

"I haven't been able to find him, sir. Not yet, anyway. But there's still time, isn't there?"

"Not much," the old captain said. "I'll have to send out the hiring notice tomorrow if I'm to get a man. I can't wait for your fellow any longer than that. You've been robbed, eh, Barsac?"

Smiling bitterly, Barsac nodded. "Foolishness, Captain. I'm cleaned out."

"How much do you need?"

"Three hundred units advance against next voyage, Captain. Is that too much?"

"Probably. Take a hundred fifty. Then if you get robbed again it won't be so bad. And be careful, Barsac; I don't want to have to find a fuelsman as well as a repairman on Glaurus."

Barsac pocketed his money and returned to the city. Hope of finding Zigmunn in time for him to get the job aboard the *Dywain* was dim indeed.

But Barsac was no longer mainly interested in getting him the job; he simply wanted to see Zigmunn, if possible to release him from the meshes of the Cult. And there were questions to be answered about his robbery and about the death of Kassa.

He hopped aboard a crowded airbus with defective air-conditioning and rode it as far as Lord Carnothute's palace. There he got off, entered the palace, and demanded to see the governor.

He was conscious that he did not make an imposing figure, in his mud-stained, blood-streaked clothes, with his gaunt bruised face and beard-stubbed cheeks. But he was determined to see Carnothute.

The governor appeared, a looming elephantine figure in ultramarine cape and sheath-like leggings of cerise trimmed with black. Barsac looked up at him and snapped, "Let me talk to you in private!"

Carnothute seemed amused. "A private audience is a rare privilege, my friend. My guards will have to be present throughout our conversation. Why do you come back?"

"To ask you questions. Did that party-girl Kassa return here yesterday after I left?"

Carnothute shrugged. "Perhaps."

"She did. Where did you and she go?"

"My fleshly life is hardly your concern, worthy spacer. Are there any less personal questions you would ask?"

"This one," Barsac said. "Some time between last night and this morning Kassa returned to her room and locked herself in. Then someone of unusual strength battered the door down and killed her. The police said it was a ritualistic murder. She was gutted and mutilated when I found her this morning. Here's your question: did you kill her?"

CHUCKLING, Carnothute said, "Party girls have short lives in Millyaurr. Why should you care whether a teenage slut lives or dies, you who land on Glaurus once a decade?"

"I care because the Cult killed her, and you're the only Cult member I know. You killed her. You killed her because she was trying to help me reach my blood-brother on Azonda, and because perhaps last night she extracted a promise from you that you chose not to keep when you reconsidered it in the harsher light of morning. Am I close, Carnothute? It's always easier to have a party girl murdered than to face the charge that

you broke your sacred word."

The governor's smooth-cheeked face darkened abruptly. In a cold, deep voice he said, "Let me give you advice, Barsac: forget the girl Kassa, and forget the Luasparru Zig-munn. The one is dead, the other beyond your reach. Give up your search and return to your ship."

"And if I choose not to?"

"Then you will die sooner than your parents expected. Leave me, Barsac." He turned to the three silent guards who waited near the door. "Take this man outside the palace and instruct him that he is not to return."

They converged on Barsac. Gripping his arms tightly, they swept him out of Lord Carnothute's presence, down the interlocking corridors, and outside the palace grounds. There, the tallest of the three spun him around and slapped his face.

Barsac growled and started for him. Another tripped him, and as he fell sprawling he realized he was in for another beating.

They worked him over for ten minutes with light-hearted gaiety, while he aimed futile blows at each of them in turn. They were Darjunnans, long-limbed and lithe, and while he managed to

bruise their silky violet skins from time to time they inflicted far worse damage on him. Five times he struggled to his feet only to be battered down again; they concentrated their attention on his empty stomach, drumming blows off it with sickening frequency.

Once he swung wildly and broke a nose; a moment later a kick behind the knee-joints dropped him on his face, gasping, and they devoted some time to his kidneys. They pummelled him efficiently, as if they were well-trained as a team; when Barsac hung to consciousness by only a thread one said, "Enough," and they left him.

He walked about ten paces and stumbled. He groped for a bench, found it, clung to its cool stone, and through puffed eyes watched drops of his own blood dripping from his face and puddling against the white flagstone walk. Dimly he realized they had not robbed him, and it surprised him.

He sat there five minutes, ten, unable to get up. His face throbbed. Every part of him ached. But they had shrewdly stopped while he yet was conscious, devilishly, so he would feel every moment of the pain.

He sensed the fact that someone stood in front of

him, looking down. He tried to open his eyes.

"Kassa?" he asked.

"No. I'm not Kassa. I suppose you found the Street of Tears, spacer. And then the Street of Blood."

"Who are you?"

"We met earlier this day. I offered to help you then. But I think you need it more now."

Through pain-hazed eyes Barsac made out the lean wiry figure of Erpad Ystilog, the Exhibitor of Curiosities.

CHAPTER IV

BARSAC LAY BACK on the hard, uncomfortable couch and tried to relax. He failed; every nerve seemed wound tightly, almost to the breaking point. He was in number 1123, Street of Liars. Yestilog had brought him home.

"Awake?" Ystilog asked.

Barsac looked up at the sal-low pock-marked face, the great curved beak of a nose. "More awake than asleep, I guess. What time is it?"

"Well after noon. Feeling better? Drink this."

Forcing himself into a sitting position, Barsac accepted the cup. It contained a warm brownish liquid; he drank without questioning. The taste was faintly sweet.

"Good. I guess I owe you thanks."

Ystilog shrugged deprecatingly. "Never mind that. Rest, now; you'll need to rebuild your strength."

The curio-exhibitor left him. Barsac wanted to protest that he could not stay here any longer, that he had to make a further attempt to find Zigmunn, that time was running short and he would soon have to return to the *Dywain*. But the pain got the better of him; he slumped back and dropped off into sleep.

He woke again, some time later, feeling stiff and sore but stronger than he had been. Ystilog stood above him.

"I feel better now," Barsac said. "And I must go. I have little time."

"Why the rush?"

"My ship leaves Glaurus at the end of this week. And before then I have things to do."

"You've had ill luck so far, I'd say. My offer still goes—a job is open for you."

"I'm a spacer."

"Leave space. It's a loathsome life. Stay here in my employ. I need a strong-bodied assistant, one who can protect a frail man like myself. I encounter much danger while traveling with my museum. And I can pay you—not well, alas, but enough."

Barsac shook his head. "Sorry, Ystilog. You've been good to me, but it's out of the question. The *Dywain* is a good ship. I don't want to leave it."

Disappointment gleamed briefly on Ystilog's face. "I could use you, Barsac."

"I tell you no. But give me some information, before I leave."

"If I can."

"My purpose is to find my blood-brother, a Luasparru, Zigmunn by name. At the cost of two beatings and a robbing I've found out that he's been initiated into the Cult of the Witch, and is now on Azonda."

The smile left Ystilog's face. "So?"

"I want to find him and break him loose from the Cult. But I know nothing about this Cult. Tell me—what is it? From what did it spring? What are its aims?"

Quietly Ystilog said, "I can tell you little—the little that every non-initiated Glauran knows. The Cult is a thousand years old—more, perhaps. Its headquarters are on Azonda. A dead planet, as you may know. Heart of the Cult is the so-called Witch of Azonda."

"Tell me about her."

"There is nothing to tell. Only Cult members may see

her. She is supposedly lovely, immortal—and faceless. Cult members spend a year on Azonda worshipping her. Perhaps one Glauran in a thousand is a member. They practice certain dark rites, and the law ignores them. People think that most of our high officials are Cult members. If your blood-brother's gone to Azonda, forget him. He's lost to you forever."

Barsac scowled. "I refuse to believe that. I still have three days to find him."

"You'll find nothing but more pain," Ystilog said. "But if you're determined, I suppose I can't hold you back. You'll find your clothes in that closet. And don't try to pay me for what I've done; it was simple common courtesy."

Barsac dressed in silence. When he had donned the last of his garments, Ystilog reappeared, smiling. He carried a mug of wine.

"Have a drink as a parting toast," Ystilog said. He handed the mug to Barsac. "To your quest. And success."

Barsac drank. Tightening his cloak around him, he headed for the door—but before he passed the threshold his legs wobbled and refused to hold him. He sagged crazily; Ystilog caught him and eased him to the couch.

Bitterly he realized he had once again played the fool. A roaring tide of unconsciousness swept down over him, and he knew he had accepted a drink that was drugged.

CHURCH BELLS woke him. He stiffened at the first echoing peal, stirred, sat up in bed. His eyes were pasted together; he had to work to get them open. He felt rusty at the joints, stiff, flabby.

Church bells. The end of the week. The *Dywain* was leaving!

He jerked off the covers, climbed from the bed, slipped, stumbled, fell headlong. His legs and feet were numb from inactivity. He hoisted himself erect, alarm giving him strength.

"Ystilog! Damn you, where are you?"

"Here I am," said a quiet voice.

Barsac whirled unsteadily. Ystilog stood behind him, smiling pleasantly. He wore a black watered silk lounging robe and a blue morning wig. In his hand was a wedge-shaped blade, eight inches long, glittering.

"You drugged me," Barsac accused. "How long did I sleep? What day is it? What time is it?"

"Your ship left Glaurus half an hour ago," Ystilog said smoothly. "I was at the spaceport. I watched it depart; it was quite lovely to see it climb high and wink into overdrive, vanishing in the blue."

Rage surged through Barsac. He took two hesitant steps forward.

"Why did you do this?"

"I needed an assistant. A good man is hard to find. And you have muscles, Barsac, if no brains. The pay is eleven units a week plus food and board."

"*Eleven units!*" Barsac clenched his fists and advanced. The smaller man waited, unafraid.

"Put that knife away, Ystilog, and—"

Ystilog sheathed the knife. "Yes? You'll what?" He waved his empty hands in the air.

"I'll—I'll—what have you done to me?" Barsac growled.

"Conditioned you against doing me harm," Ystilog said. "I would be as big a fool as you to do otherwise. If you were in my place and I in yours, I would not hesitate to kill you as brutally as possible . . . if I were able. So you are not able. See?"

Barsac looked at his impotent hands. He longed to wring Ystilog's fragile neck, but it would have been easier

to strangle himself to death. An unbreakable geas lay upon him, keeping him from action.

He sank down numbly on the couch where he had slept so long. A quiver of suppressed anger and frustration rippled through him. "Is my ship really gone?"

"Yes," Ystilog said.

Barsac moistened his lips. This had been Zigmunn's fate, and now a decade later it was his. Like brother, like brother. Naturally Captain Jaspell would not have held up departure for the sake of an overdue fuelsman; starship schedules were as inflexible as the solar precessions.

"All right," Barsac said quietly. "I've been beaten and robbed and drugged, and now I've lost my ship as well. This trip to Glaurus has been grand. Just grand. Suppose you tell me what I'm supposed to do."

THEY LEFT four days later by sea for Zunnigennar, the great continent of Glaurus' eastern hemisphere, where the people had a mildly greenish tinge to their skins and where the spoken tongue made maddeningly slight use of verbs. Barsac, in his new position as Ystilog's bodyguard, wore new clothes of synthetic silk, and

carried a fifty-watt shocker at his waist. The shocker had an illegal amplifier installed which boosted the output to lethal intensity, but this was not readily apparent even on close inspection, and the weapon could pass for a standard two-ampere model. Barsac longed to use it on his employer and fry his synapses, but his conditioning made that impossible.

The ship on which they departed was a small one which Ystilog had engaged for his personal use. It contained the whole of Ystilog's traveling museum-cum-circus.

Ystilog had acquired a variegated array of treasures. There were dreamstones from Sollighat, ghostly yellow in color and narcotic in their beauty; emerald-cut gems from the barren wastes of Duu, glistening in their metallic settings; talking trees of Thanamon, with their croaking vocabularies of seven or eight words of greeting and fifteen or twenty scabrous obscenities.

There were living creatures in cages, too: dwarf squids of Qi, hunching up in their tanks and fixing malevolent red gimlet-eyes on the onlookers; rain-toads from Mivaghik, violet-hued legless salamanders from the blazing sunside of

UpjiLaz, smiling protopods of Viron. Creatures from Earth, too, scorpions and sleek serpents and star-faced moles, platypusses and echidnas, sad-faced proboscis monkeys. The menagerie was at all times a chattering madhouse, and it was part of Barsac's job to feed each creature its special food every morning.

Ystilog had warned him to be careful; his predecessor in the job had lost an arm tossing flesh into the protopod-cage. The smiling creatures moved with blinding agility.

They opened at a showhouse in Zibilnor, largest city of the continent, and for seventeen days did spectacular business. Ystilog charged a unit a head for admission, half price for children and slaves, and during the time in Zibilnor grossed no less than twenty-eight thousand units, by Barsac's count. They jostled close, anxious to see the deadly creatures of twenty worlds that Ystilog had assembled, staring with covetous eyes at his gems and at his curios.

Twenty - eight thousand units. And through it all Barsac received eleven units a week, room and board. Eleven units a week was barely wine-money. He longed to slit Ystilog's throat, but could not approach the circus owner

with a weapon. On the last day but one of their stay in Zibilnor, Barsac sought out a professional killer. His intention was to offer the man full rights to Ystilog's circus if he would kill the entrepreneur, but when the time came to make the offer Barsac's mental block intervened, and he was unable to speak. He stumbled away, tongue-tied.

The circus moved on—slowly, across the face of Zunnigennar, Ystilog pausing here and there for a three-day engagement, a five-day stand. Local bearers helped them move the crates from one town to the next; Ystilog hired men to precede them, announcing that the show was coming.

In a locked chest by his bed Ystilog kept the receipts of the tour. He cabled his money back to Millyaurr once a week; the rest of the time the money lay there for Barsac's taking, but the compulsion against killing Ystilog extended too to robbing him and to running away. He was bound to the swarthy pockmarked little man by invisible threads stronger than the strongest metal.

BARSAC sank into the depths of despair. He drank, he rob-

bed, once he killed. That was in the town of Dmynn, on the foul, polluted river Kyllnn. A riverboat man was in the same bar as the spacer, and, with two too many drinks in his belly, was boasting of the river life.

"We are free and we travel the water—the finest life there is!"

"Not half so fine as the life of a spacer," said Barsac darkly. He sat four stools to the left, nursing the flask of wine that would be his last drink of the night. "A riverman is just a crawler next to a spacer."

Instantly the riverboater was down off his stool and facing Barsac. "What would *you* know of this?"

"I'm a spacer!"

A low chuckle eddied up about him from all sides.

"You—a spacer?" the riverboat man said contemptuously. "I know you, you who call yourself a spacer. You're the circus man's lackey. Each morning you sweep the dung from the cages of his beasts!"

Barsac did not reply. He came forward fists first, and the riverman went rocketing back against a table. Barsac waited for him to get up, so he could hit him again. He felt restraining hands gripping his arms, and shook them off. Lifting the squirming

riverman, he propped him up and slapped him.

A knife appeared. Barsac kicked it away and hit the riverman in the throat. He doubled up, choking and gasping, and managed to grate out the words, "*Lackey . . . dung-sweeper!*"

Barsac stepped backward. The riverman charged; Barsac drew his shocker, flipped up the amplifier switch, and triggered a discharge all in the same instant. A smell of burning flesh reached his nostrils a moment later.

That night they left Dmynn, traveling overland toward the forested province of Eas. As their caravan of trucks rolled out of the river town, Ystilog said coldly, "It was necessary to place a fifty-unit bribe with the local police to save you, this afternoon. For the next ten weeks your pay is cut to six units a week. And keep out of such brawls in the future."

Barsac scowled. There was nothing he could say. Ystilog was his lord and master, and there was no way of lifting the foot planted squarely on his throat.

He lay awake nights thinking of ways to kill the little circus man, and burst into frantic fits of perspiration when the inevitable realization

came that he was incapable of action.

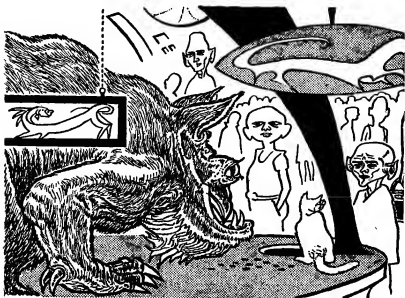
Ystilog had him. Ystilog owned him, and he served Ystilog well.

Across the face of Zunni-gennar went the traveling circus, and Ystilog grew richer. He treated Barsac well, buying him clothes, feeding him handsomely. But Barsac did a slave's work, for he was a slave. The weeks went by, lengthening into months.

Barsac wondered about the *Dywain*, bound now for the Rim stars without him, and about Zigmunn in whose name

he had parted with his profession and his freedom. He thought of the girl Kassa, so long dead now. And, on those occasions when a silver-masked Glauran crossed his path, he thought of the Cult of the Witch, and of the dead world of Azonda where his blood-brother had gone.

Winter came, and with it snow; Ystilog decided time had come to return to Mill-yaurr and live off the summer's profits. To Millyaurr they returned, stopping occasionally along the way to recoup food expenses by giving



a one-day showing in some small town. Wearily Barsac helped pack and unpack the crates. He was almost fond of Ystilog's menagerie of monsters, now, though he knew that any of the creatures would gladly kill him given the chance. He prayed for the lucky accident that would release a poison-tongued rain-toad for Ystilog, since it was impossible for Barsac wilfully to turn the beast loose on his master.

Winter held Millyaurr tight when the caravan finally returned to the Street of Liars.



Seven months had gone by since the week of Barsac's leave. He had grown gaunt and his eyes now lay deep in shadow, but his old stubbornness remained alive in him, imprisoned only by the web of hypnotic command.

But lines of despair now traced themselves on his face, as once they had on dead Kassa's face. He frequented dangerous sections of town, hoping for the release of death. He drank often in the bar where he first had met Kassa, sitting alone at the table in the rear.

He was there one night in late winter, spending a borrowed three-unit piece on liquor, when the front door opened and framed in it stood a silver-masked figure, a member of the Cult of the Witch.

Instinctively the other patrons of the bar huddled inward upon themselves, hoping not to be noticed, as the Cultist flicked gobbets of snow from his cape and entered the bar. Only Barsac looked up unafraid, and drew out the chair next to his in open invitation.

CHAPTER V

THE CULTIST paused just beyond the door, surveying the room with the ash-gray

eyes that lay just above the rim of his mask. Then, calmly, he strode down the aisle between the clustered tables and took the seat Barsac offered.

"Order two drinks," the Cultist said in a low voice.

Barsac signalled to the barkeep for two more bowls of the mulled wine he had been drinking. Timorously the bartender advanced with them, laid them down, and retreated from the Cultist's presence without even bothering to ask for his money.

Barsac studied the other. The mask ran from ear to ear and from the bridge of the nose to the upper lip; all that was visible of the Cultist's face were the gray, piercing eyes, the broad furrowed forehead, and cold downslanting lips.

"Well," Barsac said, "drink hearty." He raised the bowl, expecting to clink it against the Cultist's, but the other merely grunted and took a deep drink.

When he was through he peered at Barsac and said, "You are Barsac the Earther, lackey to the circus proprietor Erpad Ystilog."

"I am. How did you know?"

"I know. Do you love your master?"

Barsac laughed harshly. "Do you think I do?"

"What I think is irrelevant at this time. You have been watched, Barsac. Ystilog was directed to you. We believe suffering is beneficial to the soul, as we understand the soul."

"In that case you've done a good job. I've suffered."

"We know that too. Why haven't you killed Ystilog?"

"Because—because—" Barsac strove to explain the compulsion Ystilog had laid on him, but the very compulsion kept him from framing the words. "I—I—can't say it."

"A tongue-block? Ystilog is good at such things. Would you like to kill Ystilog?"

"Of course."

"But you can't. Ystilog has laid a command across your mind. Yes?"

Stiffly, Barsac nodded.

The Cultist's thin lips curled upward. "Would you approve if someone else killed Ystilog for you?"

Beads of sweat broke out on Barsac's forehead. The conversation was skirting the borders of the compulsion-area in his mind; it was only with difficulty that he was forcing through his responses.

"Yes," he said heavily.

The Cultist touched the tips of his fingers together. "In one hour Ystilog will die, if we so decide it. You will be

free from your compulsion. Azonda waits."

"Azonda?"

"Where else could you go? What else is left, Barsac? Driven downward, cut off from the life you knew, an outcast on Glaurus—take the way of Azonda. We will free you from Ystilog. Come, then, with us."

Barsac struggled to get out a reply. Finally he said, "I... accede."

The Cultist rose. "Within an hour Ystilog dies. We will be waiting for you, Barsac."

And then he was alone.

HE SAT QUIETLY, nursing his warm drink, staring through the leaded window at the great heavy soft flakes of snow drifting downward. The Cult, he thought. Why not? What else is there? Better the Cult than endless years of Ystilog, and they will free me from—
No!

Ystilog's compunction gripped him, sent him running out of the tavern into the chill winter bleakness. By acceding to the Cultist's request he was allowing the death of Ystilog, and that ran counter to his instilled conditioning. He had to prevent the murder. He had to save Ystilog. He had to get back in time.

He ran down the empty snow-choked streets. Within an hour, the Cultist had said. Burning conflict raged inside Barsac; he fought to hold his body back, to still his legs, to give the Cultists a chance to do their work, while at the same time the demon riding his mind spurred him forward to reach Ystilog and protect him.

At the corner he waited impatiently for an airbus. It came, finally, crusted over with snow, and he took it to the Street of Liars. From the terminal it was a five-block walk to Ystilog's flat; Barsac took it at a trot, stumbling in the snow every time his mind managed to reassert control over his rebellious body.

But as he drew near the flat, Ystilog's compulsion overmastered him, and uppermost in his mind was the thought that he must reach his master in time, save him from the knives of the Cultists—

Up the stairs. Down the hall. There was the door. Barsac gasped for breath; his lungs were icy, his nose and ears numb with cold.

"Ystilog! Hold on! I'm coming!"

A scream. Another, drawn-out, a ghastly bubbling wail that echoed down the corridor of the old flat and sent a dif-

ferent sort of chill through Barsac.

He slumped against the door like a cast-off doll. Ystilog's hold on him was broken. *I was too late after all*, he thought in relief. *They got him.*

The door opened. On nerveless feet Barsac entered. Four Cultists stood within.

Ystilog lay naked on his bed, in a pool of blood. The double-barred cross stood out in red clarity against the paleness of his skin. Two silver-masked figures stood above the body, holding a keen-bladed instrument with two handles over his face, slicing down—

Barsac looked away.

"It's over," said a familiar voice—the voice of the Cultist who had entered the tavern. "He died quickly. It was a pity."

"I wish I could have done it," Barsac murmured. "But the devil had me bound. Now I'm free, though. Free! Only—"

"Yes," the Cultist said. "Free. But you know the price of your freedom."

A THIRD TIME he saw Lord Carnothute, and for the first time there was no conflict between them. Barsac, weary, drained of fury and of passion, sat tiredly in an overstuffed

chair high in Carnothute's palace, listening to the huge man speak.

"You will leave for Azonda tomorrow," he said. "There are seventeen of you in this current group of initiates. The initiation period is one year. After that—well, after that you will know which roads are open for you and which are not."

"Will Zigmunn be there?"

Carnothute whirled and looked down at Barsac. "His year still has some months to run. He will be there. But if you have any idea—"

"You know I have none. I've lost all desire to reclaim him—or myself." Barsac listened to his own voice, heavy, toneless, and wondered fragmentedly how he had changed so much in these seven months on Glaurus. It was as if his experiences had tarnished his soul, rusted it, corroded it, oxidized it finally to a heap of dust, and there was nothing left for him but to accept the uncertain mercies of the Cult.

"Will you have a drink?" Carnothute asked.

"I'm not thirsty."

"Good. Loss of physical desires is essential to one entering upon his novitiate. The desires return or not, as you choose, after you receive the mask."

Barsac shut his eyes a moment. "Did you kill the girl Kassa?"

"Yes. She had put me in a compromising position, and I either would have to kill her or do away with myself. I've grown fond of life, Barsac. You know the rest."

"I see." Oddly, he did not care. Nothing seemed to matter, any more.

"Come," Carnothute said. "Meet your fellow initiates. The ship leaves for Azonda tomorrow."

He allowed himself to be taken by the hand and led into an adjoining room. There, sixteen others sat on plurofoam couches ringing the wall, and three silver-masked Cultists stood as if on guard at the entrance.

Barsac studied the sixteen. He counted five women, eleven men, all of them humanoid by designation. They slouched wearily against the wall, not speaking to one another, some of them virtually withdrawn from the universe to some private many-colored inner world. One expression was common to their faces: the expression Barsac knew must be on his own as well. They were people who had lost all traces of hope.

One of the women still wore the revealing costume of a

party-girl, but it was frayed and tattered, and so was she. She seemed to be about forty. Her face was lined and unpretty, her eyes bleak, her mouth drooping. Next to her sat a boy of seventeen, his arms grotesquely puffed and purpled with the tell-tale stigmata of the sammthor-addict. As Barsac looked the boy quivered suddenly and emitted a cascade of tears.

Still further on was a man of thirty-five whose face was a mass of scars; one eye was gone, the other askew, and his nose sprawled crazily over his face. One lip and had been slashed; green jagged tattoo-marks marred his cheeks. He was one who would do well to take the mask, Barsac thought.

He took a seat on an unoccupied couch. He told himself: *These are people who have given up. I'm not quite like them. I'm still above water. These people have all let themselves drown.*

But with a faint petulant bitterness he admitted to himself that he was wrong, that he too belonged here among these walking dead. The Cult was a dead-end pickup. To it came human refuse, people who could not sink lower, and the Cult raised them up.

The Cult had had its eyes on him from the start. They

had spotted him as a likely prospect from the moment of his landing on Glaurus, and they had followed him through each succeeding adventure, as he slipped lower and lower, as more and more of the old Barsac crumbled and dropped away, until the time had come when he could go no lower, and they had stepped in to free him from Ystilog and welcome him to their midst.

He thought of Zigmunn, like him a spacer stranded in a hostile city, and how Zigmunn must have slowly descended to whatever pit served as the entrance requirements for the Cult.

But Zigmunn had been tougher, Barsac reflected. It had taken the Luasparru eight years of life on Glaurus before he entered the Cult; Barsac had achieved the same destination in less than eight months. Zigmunn had always been the shrewd one, though, and Barsac the stolid well-muscled one who depended on the manipulations of his blood-brother to see him through a time of trouble.

He was in trouble now. But there would be no help for him from Zigmunn, for Zigmunn had gone through the trap ahead of him and waited on Azonda now.

THE SEVENTEEN were given rooms in Carnothute's palace. Cult members moved among them, speaking encouragingly to them, promising the rehabilitation the Cult held for them. Barsac barely listened. He dwelt almost entirely in an inner world where there were no betraying Sporeffiens, no lying Ystilogs, no Kassas of easy virtue, no Cult.

The night passed slowly; Barsac half-slept, half-woke, with little awareness of his surroundings. In the morning a Cultist brought him a meager breakfast, a dry bun and a sea-apple, and Barsac ate dispiritedly.

Carnothute called them all together once more to wish them well. Barsac stood, a half-corpsé among sixteen other half-corpsés, and half-listened. Part of his mind wondered where the *Dywain* was, now. More than half a year had gone by since its departure from Glaurus. Captain Jaspell had been bound for the Rim.

Probably they had already touched the worlds of purple-hued Venn and golden Paai-iad, and were moving onward toward Lorrimok and the double sun Thoptor. Doubtless the vacancies in the crew had been filled by now, and the angular man named Barsac had long

since faded from the minds of the men of the *Dywain*.

Sleepily he stroked the scars about his lips, and realized he would be seeing Zigmunn soon. Nearly eleven years had slipped by since his last meeting with his blood-brother, but Barsac had not expected the reunion to come about on Azonda.

Cultists shepherded them through a door and down into a liftshaft. There were several moments of free fall while they sank into the recesses of Carnothute's vaults. Five glistening little cars waited for them there, and the candidates entered, three in the first, four in the second, three in the third, four in the fourth, three in the fifth. A faceless Cultist sat behind the steering-panel of each car.

At a signal the lead car shot off down the dark tunnel ahead of them. Barsac, who rode in the second car, peered into the darkness, but saw nothing.

The trip took perhaps a five-minute span, perhaps an hour; in the darkness Barsac was unable to account for the passage of the moments. They emerged into light, eventually, and he saw he was at the spacefield outside the city of Millyaurr.

They quitted the cars and

stood in an uncertain clump on the bare brown soil of the spacefield. Barsac saw the shining blue-white sweep of a giant starship's fins, and wildly thought it was the *Dywain*, till he saw the name stencilled on the vessel's landing buttresses: *Mmuvvioi*. He felt no temptation to break away, run to the strange ship, inquire if there were a vacancy on board for a skilled fuelsman; he knew he belonged with the group of Cult-candidates, and made no attempt to move.

A lesser ship stood further along the landing-strip, small and slight, with a golden-green hull that bore no name. Cultists led Barsac and the other sixteen out across the field toward the nameless ship, and Barsac saw others at the field, oilers, repairmen, crewmen, passengers, draw back and stare as the procession of silver masks and shuffling zombies headed out over the field.

One by one they entered the ship. Cultists guided them to individual blast-hammocks and strapped them in; Barsac, for all his twenty years as a spaceman, made no move to draw the rig about him, but waited passively until his turn came to be strapped in.

A warning signal flashed through the ship. Barsac

closed his eyes and waited. The moment came that he thought would never come for him again: the faint anticipatory quiver as the drive compartment of a starship bursts into life, readying itself.

Lights flashed, bells rang—the old standard routine for a lifting spaceship. Something deep in Barsac's numbed mind longed to respond, to perform the actions that those signals demanded, but he remembered that on this ship he was passenger and not crewman, and he relaxed.

Later came the moment of blast-off as the drive translated matter to energy and pushed Glaurus away from the ship. Barsac felt a sickening moment of no-grav; then the vessel began to spin, and weight returned.

Through a port near his face he saw the cluttered globe of Glaurus spinning slowly against a black backdrop. The ship had spaced.

Its destination was Azonda.

CHAPTER VI

THE NAMELESS SHIP hung on a tongue of fire over the dark world Azonda; then it dropped suddenly downward, and the landing buttresses sprang out at acute angles to support it.

Twenty-six spacesuit-clad figures, Barsac among them, emerged from the hatch of the ship—seventeen Cult candidates, nine watchful members. Even through the thick folds of his spacesuit, even despite the protective warmth of his suit's energons, Barsac shivered. Azonda was a dead world.

The golden sun that warmed Glaurus was only a perfunctory dab of light out here, eleven billion miles further spaceward. At this distance, the sun was hardly a sun—more like a particularly brilliant star.

Drifts of banked snow lay everywhere, glittering faintly in the eternal dusk—Azonda's atmosphere, congealed by cold. Gaunt bare cliffs glinted redly in the distance. All was silent, silent and dead. Life had never come to Azonda.

The Witch—?

Barsac wondered. He moved along in single file, lifting one spacebooted foot and putting it down, lifting the other. It seemed to him a wind whistled against his body, though he knew that was impossible on airless Azonda, an illusion, a phantasm. He kept walking.

The impassive guides led them along. A well-worn path was cut in the ice, and they followed this.

They came, finally, to a sort of natural amphitheater, a half-bowl scooped out of the rock by a giant's hand. Barsac was unable to see into the amphitheater; a gray cloud hung obscuringly over it.

"We have come to the Hall of the Witch," the leading Cultist said quietly via suit-phones. "Beyond the curtain of gray lies the place you have journeyed toward all your days of life."

Barsac narrowed his eyes and tried with no success to see through the curtain, hoping for some glimmer of that which lay within.

"When you pass through the curtain," came the even admonitory voice, "you will divest yourselves of your spacesuits. You will stand without clothing in the presence of the Witch."

But that's impossible, Barsac's space-trained mind protested instantly. The cold, the vacuum, the pressure—we'd be dead in a minute.

"No harm will come to you," said the Cultist.

Up ahead, Barsac saw now the front men of the file disappearing into the gray curtain, vanishing first one foot, then a shoulder, then the entire body, sectioned away as if they were sliding between the molecules of a solid wall.

Leadenly Barsac moved on, waiting for his turn to come.

In time the curtain loomed inches before his nose, and without hesitation he put his right foot through and followed after. His body tingled an instant; then he had passed through and was inside, in the Hall of the Witch.

"Remove your spacesuit and inner clothing," came the stern instruction.

I can't! Barsac thought. But then he looked to left and right and saw the others stripping, shedding their spacesuits and clothing like cast-off skins and evincing no ill effects. Barsac decided some manner of force-field must be in operation, a semi-permeable field that allowed humans to enter but which also maintained an atmosphere within itself. Experimentally he reached back and touched the inner skin of the curtain behind him with the tip of one finger, and got the answer: the curtain was unyielding as granite from the inside. It was penetrable only in one direction, and all within—humans and air molecules alike—were constrained to remain.

Reassured, Barsac put his hands to his spacesuit's sealing-hasps and pried them open; he felt a whisper of air rush past his throat as he re-

moved his helmet. The suit split open like the two halves of a sea-creature's shell; he let carapace and plastron drop unheeded and peeled away the few clothes he wore beneath.

Naked now amid sixteen other naked candidates and nine Cultists clad only in their face-concealing masks, Barsac moved forward into the violet haze that blurred what lay ahead. He walked for perhaps two minutes, and then the haze cleared away.

He stood facing the Witch of Azonda.

SHE SAT ENTHRONED, grasped in a translucent chair trimmed with onyx and edged in chalcedony. Before her there was a sort of dais, an altar of a kind, carved of some delicate semi-transparent pinkish stone. Visible beneath the outer barrier of the stone was a dark something, a mechanism perhaps; it was impossible to see it clearly.

Barsac stared at the Witch.

She was a woman who sat in naked magnificence, hands resting lightly on the knurled sides of her throne. Her skin was of a light gold color, warm-looking; her figure was lush, her breasts high, rounded. She had no face. From forehead to chin all was smooth

and gently curved, polished almost, a blank planchet on which a sculptor might have carved a face had he chosen to. Yet she did not look incomplete; she seemed perfect to Barsac, a living work of art.

Around her was ranged a semi-circle of acolytes: eleven men, Barsac saw, naked all, but with faces masked. Kneeling at the outer edge of the semi-circle were eight women, masked also. From the group rose a low wordless chant, a wailing ululation that rose shiveringly through tortured chromatic intervals and down again.

The sound swelled out about him. In his mind Barsac heard a soft voice say, *Come to me, for I am the Way; come to me, for in me there is no more pain, in me there is only peace and surcease from the suffering you have known.*

Fronds of light lapped at his mind. He felt impelled forward; he seemed to glide.

An end to pain, an end to torment, an end to self.

In me there is peace always, and companionship, and in my company will you serve cheerfully and abide for all eternity.

In response to an unvoiced command Barsac stretched out both his hands, and felt them being taken by others; a

dream-light suffused the area, and he was conscious of warmth and a kind of oozing softness.

Hands joined, the seventeen candidates advanced toward the Witch and knelt before the altar.

This was the end of the quest, Barsac thought; here was where all struggle ended, where all beingness cascaded back into the primordial womb of creation.

In my light will you be healed—

Fingers caressed his mind, urging him to give up his oneness, to become part of the brotherhood that called itself the Cult of the Witch. He felt the bonds of tension that gripped his mind relax under the gentle ministrations. It would be so easy to slip away from himself, to allow his mind and soul to merge with the others.

He relaxed. His self ebbed away.

Look upon me, came the command.

Barsac looked up at the faceless silent perfection of the Witch. Somehow his eyes slipped from her after a moment, and he scanned the eleven Cult acolytes ranged behind her, his eyes caught and fascinated by the brightness of the reflections from

their polished masks. It was as if in each of the masks a Witch shined.

Curious, Barsac thought, with the part of his mind that still remained to him. One of those acolytes has a scarred face.

A strange pattern of incisions radiating outward from the lips. Barsac frowned. The beauty of the Witch called to him to cease all thinking and surrender himself, but he shook the temptation away impatiently, and his hand rose to feel the deep grooves that disfigured his own face.

He and that acolyte were disfigured in the same fashion, he thought.

Odd. How could that be? How—

Awareness flooded back to him. He ripped his hands free of the crooning candidates who knelt next to him and stood up, remembering now.

His shout split the sanctified silence:

"Zigmun!"

THE LIGHT WAVERED. His sudden piercing bellow had broken the spell. Around him the candidates wandered in uncertain circles, torn from their trance but not masters of themselves any longer. Behind the throne, the stunned

acolytes froze in astonishment, while the Witch beamed blandly down, seeming to smile facelessly, and then darkened slowly into a figure of horror.

Barsac moved forward.

"Zigmun! You, behind the mask—I know you by the scars! I've come here to get you, bring you back. Do you know these scars, Zigmun?"

One of the stock-still acolytes spoke: "Barsac!"

"Yes. And the Witch failed to conquer me after all!" His stubbornness burned like a flame within him now; he forced himself forward toward the ring of acolytes. "Off with that mask, Zigmun. Come back to Glaurus with me."

"Don't be a fool, Barsac. The Witch offers peace."

"The Witch offers lies!"

"You can never leave her," the Luasparru said. "Once you see her, you are part of her; the rest is superficial. Did you see her, Barsac?"

"I saw her. But I remain a free man."

"Impossible! You see only yourself mirrored in the Witch; she exists only if the Witch-forces exist in you, in the dark cesspool at the back of your mind."

"No," Barsac growled.

"Yes! If you are here, if you

have seen the Witch—then you are lost! Yield, Barsac! Give in. Worship her, for she is within you!"

"No!"

He pressed relentlessly forward. A whisper passed through his mind, but he knew it was meant not for him but for the acolytes: "*Stop him.*"

They laid hands on his wrists and clung to him. Angrily he shook them off; his body, so long held shackled, now swung free, and his fists clanged gaily off a silver mask. An acolyte sank, blood spouting.

Ten of the male acolytes were upon him now; only Zigmunn remained alone, cowering in panic behind the throne of the Witch. Barsac's arms threshed; acolytes went spinning to the ground, right and left. His fists pummelled in and out, scattering them as he moved on. He was unstoppable.

Three acolytes now clung to him, then two, then one. He plucked the remaining man off, hurled him aside, and vaulted toward the Witch.

Through the Witch.

He passed through her as if she were so much dream-smoke, and, clearing the throne, caught Zigmunn by the throat. He stared bitterly at the blood-scars on the

Luasparru's face, then whipped off the silver mask with a contemptuous swipe of his hand.

The drug-hazed eyes that peered at his were the Luasparru's, but they were not those of the Zigmunn he had known. Sickened, Barsac released him and the pencil-thin Luasparru went reeling to one side.

"There is no way out of the Cult," Zigmunn said quietly. "Why did you follow me here? Why have you caused this havoc?"

"I . . . came to get you," Barsac said in a strangled voice. "But there's nothing left to get. You belong soul and body to—to *this*."

"Go back below," Zigmunn urged crooningly. "Kneel and beg her forgiveness. She will welcome you back. Once you have seen her, you can never escape her. You've given up your self, Barsac."

HE SHOOK his head bitterly. He saw now it had all been in vain; there was indeed no escape, and Zigmunn was lost forever. Heavily he turned away. The Witch was still on her throne, staring forward.

What was she? Thought-projection established by an unscrupulous priesthood? Alien

entity seeking companionship on this dead world? He would never know.

The acolytes were recovering from their state of shock, now. They were creeping toward him. From elsewhere in the dusk-cloaked hall, other silver-masked figures advanced on him.

With a sudden bellow of rage, Barsac snatched up the thin figure of Zigmunn and grasped the emaciated Luasparru tightly. Then, with a savage display of force, he dashed Zigmunn against the translucent altar of pink stone.

It shattered; the stone must have been only glass-thin. Zigmunn rolled to one side and lay still.

The curtain of force winked out.

Barsac froze for just a moment, staring down at the shattered altar, and a mighty scream went up from the acolytes who saw. In a vast rush the atmosphere fled outward, and the stinging airlessness of Azonda swept in over the Hall of the Witch.

Moving as though through a sea of acid Barsac ran toward his discarded spacesuit. It seemed to take hours for him to don it, hours more before air coursed through his helmet and he breathed again.

Actually, no more than fifteen seconds had gone by.

He turned. A hundred naked figures lay sprawled round the altar. Bubbles of blood trickled from their faces as they coughed out their lives into the vacuum that surrounded them. The Witch sat complacently through it all, paler now but unchanged otherwise and apparently unchangeable.

A harsh cry rumbled up from somewhere in Barsac's throat, and he turned away, retching, and started to run. Back, across the snow, away from the scene of death that had been the Hall of the Witch, toward the waiting golden-green ship that stood on its tail in the distant snow.

He reached the ship. He entered, converted to autopilot, hastily set up for blast-off. No time for elaborate checks and signals, now; there was but one passenger, and that passenger cared little whether he lived or died.

The ship lifted. Barsac clung desperately to the rails of the control-room wall and let the fist of gravity buffet him senseless. He dropped finally and lay flat against the coolness of the deckplates.

He awoke some time later. The ship's chart-tank told him he was well outside the Glaurus system now, cutting diag-

onally across the lens of the galaxy with the triple system of Ooon as the immediate destination. Barsac stared at his tortured unfamiliar face in the burnished mirror and realized he had escaped the Cult. They lay dead, back on dead Azonda, and he had a ship of his own; all the galaxy lay open for him. Life could begin again.

Or had he escaped the Cult? He wondered, as the nose of his ship drew ever nearer the tricolored glory of Ooon. For the tongue of the incomprehensible Witch had licked his mind, and perhaps Zigmunn

had not lied. The Witch would be always with him whether he willed it or not, whether he fled as far as the cinder-stars that lay behind the galactic lens. He stared at the white-haired fleshless face in the mirror, and it seemed to him that behind him waited another face, a featureless blank face, white and shining.

She would be with him always, and the memory of eight months of hell on Glaurus and Azonda. Stroking the lateral grooves that lined his jaws, Barsac studied the chart-tank, and waited for tricolored Ooon to draw near.



ADVENTURES IN THE FUTURE

Next issue, Calvin M. Knox will be back with the third—and last—short novel in the “Chalice of Death” series. Again, Hal-lam Navarre battles to restore Earth to its rightful place in the universe—and now the forces ranged against him are mightier and better-prepared than ever before. It’s a story full of intrigue, mystery and suspense, climaxed by one of the greatest space battles ever described in science fiction. The title, “Vengeance of the Space Armadas,” should give you the idea. Together with the first two “Chalice” stories, this is sure to be rated as a classic in years to come.

It will be backed up with another short novel that matches it thrill for thrill: “The Red Sun Rises,” by a top favorite writer appearing here for the first time, Charles V. De Vet. There will also be short stories by Harlan Ellison, Christopher Anvil, and others, plus the regular departments. So be sure to get your copy of the next SFA—on sale at all newsstands January 7.



H. Bayes



One Against Herculum

by JERRY SOHL

*The planet made him a killer—
then stole his victim from him!*

Illustrated by Richard Kluga

CHAPTER I

ALAN DEMUTH sat in the Testing Chief's outer office in quiet confidence, his eyes focussed beyond the half dozen file attendants and through the long window, seeing the flyabouts there. They looked like water bugs chasing each other, darting here and there. They might have looked like bees if the sky had been a blue

instead of the yellow-green of the dome.

He could imagine what was taking place in Jack Bohannen's office. That was why it was taking so long for Bohannen to call him in. Bohannen would be surprised to see the different score he'd rung up this year—quite a change from the lad who'd taken the tests fresh from Earth a year ago, not caring too much, filled with reckless abandon and certain he could pass with ease. He'd had a year to sober up in and he'd used it to make sure he'd not only pass but do so well he'd hit one of the higher echelon jobs.

The test hadn't been easy and the machine giving it had been merciless, but Demuth had met every challenge. Sure, he'd missed some—everyone does because everyone isn't perfect—but he'd got more than he'd dreamed he would. In a few minutes one of those clerks would be handed his tape to file away. It wouldn't make any difference which—Altairian, Aquarian, Vegan or Earthman would put it in its correct place. Perhaps the clerk's eyebrows would rise, seeing his score—except that Vegans and Altairians had no eyebrows.

The thin Aquarian, so fragile and anemic and human-

like, looked up from her desk, her pink eyes finding him on the bench. In her shrill voice she said, "You may go in now, Mr. Demuth."

"Thank you, honey," Demuth said, pleased to see the quickening of her life fluid beneath the translucent flesh of her cheeks. He gave her a smile as he walked by, but she had turned away and he only saw the pipestem bones of her neck and the hint of delicate muscles beneath the flesh at the back of her head. They looked so very brittle and weak, he thought. But he knew they were not. They were a race very much like people of Earth, and they, along with the Altairians and Vegans, had been emancipated from their galaxies.

Demuth entered Bohannen's office. The burly Earthman rose, extended his hand and said, "Glad to see you, Alan. Have a chair." From the look on Bohannen's face it seemed to Demuth that Bohannen had been considerably jarred by his score. Unless it was something else that gave him that look, and even as he thought it he became convinced this was so.

And so Demuth sat, uneasiness rising sickeningly from his stomach.

"About your test," Bohan-

nen began ominously, running a hand across his forehead as if to wipe away perspiration, oddly out of place in the perpetually temperate climate of Herculum. "I'm sorry to report you didn't do any better this year."

IF THE DOME itself had come falling in upon Demuth he could not have been more thunderstruck.

You didn't do any better.

Impossible! He had studied a whole year, had led an exemplary life, living out his year as a flyabout taximan in accordance with status rules and the results of the previous year's test.

Demuth found his hands gripping the sides of the chair hard, and slipping there because they were suddenly so wet with sweat and strain. He stammered, "I—I don't believe it!"

Bohannen wiped his forehead again where hair was beginning to recede. He managed to give a faint smile. "I'm sorry, Alan, but facts are facts. If it's any comfort to you, the results are even lower than last year. I don't know if I can convince Status you should be kept on as a taximan. You should be downgraded."

"There must be some mistake," Demuth said. "I tell you I can't believe it! I was so confident, so sure. . . ."

Bohannen shrugged. "Your I.Q., endocrine balance and emotional stability are all down ten points." He tapped the tape with his finger. "The machine is never wrong. You know that."

"The machine," Demuth said coldly, "is run by humans, and humans are sometimes wrong."

"Not in this office," Bohannen said stiffly. Then he narrowed his eyes. "Are you suggesting I upgrade you anyway?"

"All I want is the truth. I think it ought to be investigated. I had a good score at Flagg. I can't understand it."

"The old school tie, eh?" Bohannen fixed him with a cold eye. "You can't expect me to do for you what I wouldn't do for anybody else, Alan, just because we went to the same training school on Earth."

"All I want is to take the test again. Only I want it monitored this time."

Bohannen got up quickly. "You're wasting your time. You're no different from anybody else. Nobody takes the test except once a year. And nobody can ask for a monitoring but me. What's the mat-

ter, don't you like being a taxi-man?"

Demuth gripped the sides of the chair even harder to keep from rising and hitting Bohannen square in the mouth. He held himself in, said only, "That's an ugly thing to say, Jack."

"Is it?" The eyes narrowed. "You never liked me, did you, Alan?"

"Since this is becoming a breast-baring session, no."

Bohannen laughed. "I can see why you don't, now. I came here two years ago, achieved such a fine score they gave me the job of Chief of Testing. Could that be the reason?"

"Don't be childish. I recall at Flagg you didn't do so well."

"I've improved," Bohannen said, giving him a sly look. "Weren't you in the class behind me?"

"You know damn well I was. I happened to beat you at the annual Classic, in case your brain has atrophied. It was bad luck that got me assigned to Herculum with you here."

"Yes, yes," Bohannen said, smiling, "you did manage to come out on top in that little fracas, didn't you? I'd forgotten."

Demuth leaned forward in his chair. "I know you

wouldn't forget a thing like that. Why don't you tell me what's behind all this cat and mouse play? I know I didn't do badly on the test—even on the first one, I'm thinking now—but I bided my time, waited out the year. You've had your fun, you've got even. Now what? Why should you engineer my low score the second time?"

A slow smile gathered strength in Bohannen's face until the man was beaming at him. "I'll give you credit, Alan. You are smart. Being so, you will know the answer to what I'm going to offer."

"What are you leading up to?"

Their eyes met and held for a moment. Then Bohannen said coldly, "I want ten per cent of your credits if I turn in your true score, which is high enough to get you any job you want. Ten per cent for as long as you hold the grade."

Demuth stared incredulously.

"If you refuse . . . Well, let's not talk about that. Let's talk about your accepting. But even if you accept, remember I can demand a re-run on you, Alan. Any time. And you'll be downgraded if I wish. And if you think you can report me to anyone for making this

offer to you, you'd better think twice. I could see to your transfer to some bleak outpost to hell and gone. Remember, you have no proof."

The uneasiness Demuth had felt at the beginning had long since turned to cold fury and then to biting, white-hot anger. Unable to contain it any longer, he rose. "I'll never pay you the first credit, Jack," he said in a quiet voice.

Bohannen sighed. "Then I'm sorry. Truly sorry, Alan, to have to downgrade you from flyabout taximan. But you understand my position. Don't worry about it. I'll tell the Status people to try to find *something* for you on Herculum." He chuckled, inspected the tape, shook his head. "You are difficult, Alan. Difficult and unreasonable. So many others have been so quick to agree to my little arrangement. What makes you so reluctant?"

"You admit you've done this to others?"

Bohannen said dryly, "Come now, let's not be naive, Alan. How else can a man accumulate a nest egg during his ten years on Herculum? I succeed a man who made a sizable fortune and I intend to do the same. It happens that the position of Testing Chief is an impregnable one."

Demuth, consumed with rage, turned and walked to the door lest he leap over the desk and throttle Bohannen.

"Sure you won't change your mind?" Bohannen called after him.

Demuth turned and faced him squarely. "It may interest you to know I'm applying for criminal status at once."

Bohannen snorted. "That's the hard way to try upgrading. Why be a pawn in a police exercise? Besides, the games seldom work. We have a good law enforcement department here on Herculum." He rose from behind the desk, walked to the door, and together they went into the outer office. "Why don't you think it over, Alan? I won't enter your downgrading for several days." He reached out a friendly arm for Demuth's shoulders, but Demuth moved away.

"I don't happen to play that way, Jack. I've done all the thinking I need."

"Well then," Bohannen said scornfully, "don't apply for anything trivial. It would hardly lift you up to taximan."

"I'm going to apply for the maximum," Demuth said between his teeth. "Murder."

"Really?" Bohannen tried to look bored. "I presume that I'm your chosen victim?"

"You've guessed it," Demuth said, turning on his heel and walking to the outer office door.

"I'll be waiting," Bohannen called after him. "But if you want to know, you'll never make it."

CHAPTER II

THE CLERK in the Status Office was an Altairian. He shuffled papers on his desk with his hairy seven-fingered hands, and when he looked up, Alan Demuth could see that his compound eyes had the greenish tinge they held when Altairians are tired—or bored. The clerk said, in his whistling voice, "Yes?"

Demuth looked back, unblinking. "I want to apply for a change in classification."

The clerk sighed. "So do I. Who doesn't? Has it been a year since your last test?" The hairy hand reached for a printed form.

"No," Demuth said evenly. "It hasn't even been half a day."

"Oh." The hairy hand dropped the form. "Well, you're not the first to take a test and be disappointed. But you should know the law here. No upgrading in such cases, and you wouldn't want to be downgraded, would you? The

machines are never wrong."

"Something went wrong."

The eyes became greener. "Sorry." The Altairian's hands returned to the work on his desk. "Better luck next year."

"No," Demuth said, taking a firm grip on the hard counter. "Better luck this year. I'm applying for criminal status."

The green flashed fire. "Criminal status?"

Demuth nodded. "That's what I said."

The hexagonal facets of the eyes glowed with a little orange. The hand went into a drawer, withdrew a red printed form. "Have you considered the degree? Simple thievery, robbery—maybe even assault, if you wanted to commit yourself that far."

"None of those," Demuth said. "I want the maximum."

"The maximum?" the clerk repeated, his eyes glowing like red coals. "Did you say the maximum?"

"Yes."

"But that's murder!"

"I know," Demuth said calmly. "Where do I sign?"

The eyes, all the thousands of facets, regarded him for a long moment. Then the Altairian said, "Wait just a moment," and disappeared through a door bearing the legend CHIEF OF STATUS. He was gone only briefly, and re-

turned to accompany Demuth through his workspace to the inner chamber.

The man behind the desk was an Earthman. He was a little older than the usual run of Herculum men and his blue eyes were even more tired than the Altairian's. He indicated a chair.

"I'm Jeff Branner," he said. His eyes roved over Demuth appraisingly. "Clerk Krenor tells me you want to apply for criminal status. The maximum."

"That's right." Demuth took the chair.

Branner nodded. "Usually people here on Station Herculum are satisfied to try to upgrade themselves by a successful act of petty thievery. I recall only a single case of application for murder and that ended tragically for the applicant. Suppose you tell me why you've chosen that category and whom you wish to murder."

Demuth took a deep breath. "When I applied for station life it wasn't to run a flyabout taxi. I trained four years for life here."

Smiling, Branner said, "Didn't we all? Competition is keen here, Mr. Demuth, and somebody has to fly the taxis."

"I was first in my class at Flagg, Mr. Branner."

"This isn't Flagg and this isn't Earth."

"When I first arrived exactly one year ago I took the test. I had an abysmally low score. I only missed being sent elsewhere by the smallest margin—according to the test."

Branner nodded. "It sometimes happens to young men in their first days on Herculum."

"Today I took the second test. It was lower than the first."

"Well, at least that doesn't sound right."

"It isn't. Neither result is correct."

"You think your score is really higher, don't you?" He smiled. "Mr. Demuth, you are no different from others. Everyone thinks he is better than his results indicate."

"I not only think so, Mr. Branner, I know so."

Branner's eyebrows lifted ever so slightly. "I suppose you're going to tell me someone altered your score."

"Yes. Jack Bohannen did."

"Jack Bohannen is Chief of Testing, Mr. Demuth."

"I know. I also know he takes a rake-off for upgrading personnel to their actual scores."

Branner's face hardened, the eyes grew cold. "That's a very

serious accusation, Mr. Demuth. It hits right at the heart of everything here on Herculum. Do you expect me to believe it?"

"Yes. I happen to know Jack Bohannen rather well. I was with him at Flagg for three years. As a matter of fact, it was a mystery to many of us how he managed to get through school at all."

Branner studied him coldly. "There is a lot of difference between school life and life in a dome on a planet like Herculum. I can hardly believe a man of Bohannen's caliber would risk being thrown off this station for a thing like that. Do you have any proof of your allegations?"

Demuth said dismally, "None except I know my score was higher than he says and that he offered me upgrading if I would turn over to him ten per cent of my earnings."

"Really, Mr. Demuth, I can hardly believe—"

"I don't care what you believe," Demuth said harshly, "I happen to be telling the truth."

"It sounds more like the maunderings of a psychopath, if you want a frank opinion."

"I'm not asking you, I'm telling you."

Branner shook his head. "I'm sorry, if you really think

such a thing happened. You know action can't be initiated on a nebulous thing like that."

"I'm not asking you to initiate action. I came here to apply for criminal status."

"You would be laughed out of any office you'd try to convince that the Testing Chief is unscrupulous."

Demuth set his lips, then said, "So I will rid Herculum of him for you."

BRANNER SIGHED, rose, went to the windows, cleared them with a pass of his hand near the activator, looked out on the city. "I think you're making a mistake applying for criminal status, Demuth. Particularly murder. Even if it's true that Bohannen juggled your score—and I doubt it—you're taking a million to one chance in a category like that. Few people even get by with petty thievery, to say nothing of killing. The authorities will be watching your every move."

"They've got to let me get away at the beginning."

"Yes, but they'll find you." Branner was silent at the window, lost in thought.

Demuth looked at his broad back and, for the first time, thought what failure would mean. But he immediately forced his mind away from it.

Bohannen was the real criminal, and his downgrading of Demuth was a challenge Demuth could not disregard. When he stepped out to murder him he'd actually be doing Herculum a service. History would bear him out after the deed was done, after the facts were brought to light.

Branner at the window was saying, "I suppose it's a good thing, letting those who are dissatisfied resort to criminal status. God knows what the frustrations might bring if the status rules were so rigid under the dome a man didn't have that final recourse."

He turned from the window. "Look out on the city, Demuth. What do you see? Station number one hundred twenty-seven, known to us as Herculum. Two hundred odd thousand people—Altairians, Earthmen, Aquarians, and Vegans, a potpourri of the cosmos—all living together beneath a dome a mile high on a planet in the 95 Herculis double star system because it happens to be a point equidistant to a number of systems. It never really becomes home to any of them or to us. It is an intergalactic stop for spacers, probably always will be.

"I'll have been here ten years at the end of this year, Demuth. Then I'm retiring,

taking my family back home to Earth, to an Earth my son has never seen. When he comes of age he'll have to go through it just as I have, either here or at some other station, way station or outpost on some minor planet, before he earns the privilege of returning to Earth to live, even as others from other systems are on duty here to earn the right to return to their own planets." He smiled. "Living like this you know there's never any place like home."

Demuth had listened patiently. Now he said levelly, "Just what does all that mean, Mr. Branner?"

"It means ten years isn't so long even as a flyabout taximan."

Demuth shook his head. "I'm not going home that way."

"You're too ambitious."

"Call it that if you wish. I want to go home with something to be proud of. I know I'm no ignoramus."

"Nobody on Herculum is an ignoramus."

"I'm as good or better than Bohannen."

"Isn't that just common jealousy talking?"

"No. Something deeper than that. Suspicion, perhaps. I lived out the required year, took the test again. Now

I'm sure of it, especially since I've seen Bohannen."

Branner shrugged. "And you have thought about failure?"

"If I fail, I will be expelled from the dome." Then Demuth added tightly, "And nobody can live more than two hours out beneath those two suns."

The Status Chief sighed, pushed the red form across the desk. "You know the penalty for failure. There's nothing more I can do for you. Sign here."

As Demuth scrawled his name, Branner said, "You will report at police headquarters at five-thirty tomorrow morning."

On his way out, Demuth heard Branner say softly, "Good luck."

CHAPTER III

THE VEGAN strode to the platform, the overhead lights shining on his smooth feathers, his bald head and eagle-like nose. Demuth noted that his wings had been clipped close to his body in accordance with the Herculum rules and wondered how large his wing span would be if they had not been. If Vegans had been allowed to fly here they would have had an unfair ad-

vantage over all the others. *Equality*, he thought bitingly, *is the keyword of Herculum.*

"That's about the biggest Vegan I ever saw," a voice at Demuth's side said. "No wonder he's the chief of police."

Demuth turned to see an Earthman like himself staring with a half-open mouth at the figure that was now turning to them, a military figure full of authority.

The man at Demuth's side turned, grinned and said, "I'm sorry to go spouting off like that. Name's Pilson. Frank Pilson. Yours?"

"Demuth. Alan Demuth."

They shook hands gravely and at that moment the police chief started to speak in the rasping voice of the Vegans, a hint of a smile on the hard lips below his beak-like nose. "Only six here? Evidently there is more satisfaction in Station Herculum today. Yesterday there were nine." His round eyes examined the two Earthmen, three Altairians and single Aquarian who stood silently before him. The fragile Aquarian was shaking visibly. Aquarians were highly excitable, and shook at the slightest provocation. The Vegan went on: "I am glad to see there are no Vegans here this morning."

So much for racial pride,

Demuth thought, reflecting on the Vegan penchant for ruffling their feathers to display the brilliant colors of the under-layers. *Let's get on with it.*

The police chief picked up a paper from a table at his side. "You will be interested in yesterday's results. Five cases of thievery—that's worth ten points; two cases of robbery, worth twenty points because it involves another person; one case of assault, worth twenty-five points; and a single case of assault with a deadly weapon, worth thirty points." He looked at the criminal status candidates and added dryly, "Needless to say, none was successful."

He let this sink in, then went on, "During the past month there have been about two hundred contenders, some for the excitement of it, some for honest attempts to upgrade themselves. Of this number, three successfully completed their missions. The others took downgrading or penalties for their failures. The unsuccessful ones now realize the futility of believing the machines are wrong, know their ambitions exceed their abilities. Or perhaps it is simply that their fling at adventure is at an end. Today they are quietly resting in

their cells or are busy with penal work groups, depending upon the nature of their violation. Suffice it to say, they have time to think about things here on Herculum now."

The police chief's eyes roved over the group. "Everyone knows life under the dome can be dull. We don't question your motive for choosing criminal status, and be assured we make no attempt to uncover it. But do be assured our department is ready to arrest you as quickly as possible."

The tall Vegan's wings wriggled a little, settled in place again. He went on: "The time is five forty-five. At six you will be released and have until six tomorrow morning to complete your missions. No attempt will be made to interfere with your activities for the first five minutes." He picked up another sheet, faced them rather sternly and said, "The roll call. Senbla Ksank."

"Assault. Proplap Y."

The Aquarian shuddered, moved forward. "Here."

"Robbery. Gadda Kruklik."

"Here."

"Assault. Trenor Karnak."

"Here."

"Thievery. Frank Pilson."

"Here."

"Robbery. Alan Demuth."

"Here."

The Vegan's eyes looked at him squarely. "Murder."

Demuth felt the others stiffen, heard them gasp.

The police chief managed to convey a thin smile. "Murder, gentlemen, is worth fifty points." After a moment he added, "There was one other case of murder three years ago. It was quite unsuccessful. The subject was apprehended within half an hour because he failed to put the department to any great test. The next day he died in the hot sand five miles from the dome. A half-track brought him back. I daresay he wasn't a pretty sight."

THE VEGAN now shuffled the papers on his desk, withdrew an envelope, held it out to Demuth. "I was instructed to give you this." Then his eyes snapped to the wall clock. "It is now three minutes to six. At the sound of the gong the doors behind you will open and you will have five minutes of freedom—or more, if you're lucky or show considerable aptitude." He strode rapidly from the platform, paused at a side door before going through it, to say, "Good luck, gentlemen."

Demuth tore off the end of the envelope, withdrew the paper and opened it. It read:

I will be in my office until 6 p.m. today for your convenience. Do drop by. I won't be in my office tomorrow after 6 a.m. because I have an appointment to see you through the dome locks to the burning sands outside.

Jack Bohannen

Demuth crumpled the paper and, rather than throwing it to the floor where it might be found, stuffed it in his pocket. Pilson had been watching him and said, "Bad news?"

"A challenge, that's all."

Pilson looked at the clock. "Two minutes yet. I wonder where I'll be twenty-four hours from now."

"I'm beginning to wonder where I'll be."

"Don't let them get you down."

They moved toward the door, Demuth's heart commencing a rapid beat as he realized in a few minutes he would be trying to elude the police. Pilson didn't seem much worried.

"What are you going to do when you go through that door?"

Demuth looked at him narrowly.

Pilson laughed a little. "Look, I'm in the same boat as you. I'm just wondering how far ahead you've thought. Me, I've got everything planned. I've even got a place to go."

"You'll never commit your robbery holed up somewhere."

"Ah," Pilson said with a mysterious smile, "that's only the beginning, this place I'm going to. They'll never arrest me when I leave it."

"Why?"

"Because," and Pilson drew closer and said guardedly, "I'm not going to be Frank Pilson any more. I'm going to change my face. Make-up. Can't tell it from the real thing. Got the apartment, got the girl who's going to let me use it. Want to come along? Connie might as well make two comfortable."

There was hardly time to think. Demuth had to grudgingly admit he had given little thought to what he was going to do, except go after Bohannen. Somewhere along the line he'd pick up a weapon, get to Bohannen's office and kill him. Of course it wouldn't be easy—he hadn't expected it to be—but he was bound and determined to carry it out. Pilson's idea sounded good, but he didn't like the idea of team-

ing up with anyone. He wanted to get it over with and then hide out for the remainder of the time. Still . . .

CHAPTER IV

THE GONG SOUNDED and its ring reverberated through the room as the doors slid up.

"Coming?" Pilson asked over his shoulder, already starting through the door.

"Coming," Demuth said, dashing to his side, wondering if he would regret his move.

The six ran out to the smooth street, the three Altairians running off to the left, the Aquarian streaking out of sight ahead of Demuth and Pilson on the right. People already in the street jumped aside and some, aware of what was going on, cried out with wishes for luck.

Demuth and Pilson took the first street to the left, then the next to the right, and then, with the next one to the left, slowed down to a walk. Pilson kept glancing at the sky, the barely visible dome far up on the haze, and Demuth asked him why he did this.

"They might have a flyabout up there," he replied.

"They're supposed to give us the first five minutes."

Pilson grinned. "Never

trust the police. That's my motto. Take nothing for granted."

"How far is this apartment of yours?"

"Oh, it's not my apartment. It belongs to a girl named Connie Craig. And it's not far. Come on, but keep a look out."

They quickened their pace down the wide street, just two among two hundred thousand people. Several flyabout taxis stopped nearby and Demuth turned away lest he be recognized. Pilson told the taximen they were walking and would continue to do so, thank you.

Once they rounded a corner, nearly ran into an Altairian in uniform who eyed them hostilely. Pilson said, "I beg your pardon," and proceeded on casually with Demuth at his side. Hearing a sudden stirring behind them, they turned and saw the Altairian coming up fast.

"Let's go," Demuth said, breaking into a run.

"Right with you," Pilson said between his teeth as he caught up.

They ran half a block. Demuth risked a look, saw the policeman was gaining, shouted, "In here," and ducked into a doorway, Pilson at his heels. Luckily, the riser was at street level. The two jumped

in, the door slammed shut, and Pilson instructed it to take them to the top floor. The riser shot up the shaft and came to a gentle stop at the top floor, the doors sliding open. They stepped out of a cupola to the roof.

"Here," Pilson said, pulling on Demuth's arm. They headed for a private two-seater. Pilson lifted the rear cover where the mechanism was housed, with flying fingers adjusted wires, came back to squeeze in with Demuth. "We've got wings. Take off."

Demuth activated the starter and gently the flyer purred from the room. He was beginning to have a healthy respect for Pilson. Any man who could rewire a flyer that fast to bypass the lock mechanism was a man worth knowing. He chanced a look back at the roof, and saw the policeman jump out of the cupola with his gun in his hand. It was useless at this distance; the gun's blast would reach the craft, but would be inaccurate at this range. He thought: *So far so good.*

"I know one thing," Pilson said. "They've got out descriptions of us. That Altairian cop will be letting them know we've hooked a flyabout."

Demuth nodded. "I'll set it

down. Which way is this apartment you mentioned?"

Pilson took his bearings. "A little to the left and straight ahead for a few blocks."

Demuth kicked in the accelerator. They shot ahead at full throttle, Demuth twisting the wheel to bear left. Suddenly he kicked in the brake. The flyabout stalled and fluttered to the ground, landing in a park area.

Both men jumped from the flyer, and ran through a heavy growth of bushes. On the other side they straightened up and started to walk again. Pilson's eyes went to the sky and he grinned, 'elbowed Demuth. "Look," he said.

Three police flyers arced overhead, stalled and dropped behind them in the park.

"One more block," Pilson said.

They walked, Demuth trying to do so as nonchalantly as possible, trying to be just anybody out for a walk with a friend, at the same time keeping a wary eye out for uniforms. He wished he could be as cool as Pilson seemed to be. But Pilson was out for assault and not for murder. That would make a difference.

"Turn here," Pilson said.

They rounded a corner and Pilson guided him to twin doors in a tall building De-

muth saw at once was an apartment house. Before a door on the fourth floor Pilson confidently activated the viewscreen and beamed at it. Almost at once it lost its opaqueness and a head became visible.

DEMUTH had been expecting a woman, but he hadn't been expecting to see anyone as pretty as this—and view-screens were notable for what they lost in detail.

"It's me, honey," Pilson said.

The door opened to reveal a girl not as tall as Demuth, attired in a becoming house-dress that failed to hide the fullness of her figure. Her eyes were warm and welcoming, and she said in a soft voice, "I've been expecting you." For a moment Demuth thought he had seen her before, but then he could have seen her without remembering where.

"Come on in," Pilson said, and he closed the door after Demuth who suddenly found himself strangely ill at ease before this girl. Pilson said to her now, "Everything where I left it?"

"Yes, Mr. Pilson."

Pilson stepped back. "Mr. Pilson? Honey, it's me,

Frank." Then he grinned. "Oh, I know. It's because of him, eh? Well, there's nothing to worry about. He's all right. His name is Demuth. Alan Demuth. Alan, meet Connie. Connie Craig."

The touch of the hand she offered was cool and soft. Demuth felt the flush creep over his face and he thought: *I'm behaving like a schoolboy.*

Connie said, "You're one of them, too?"

Pilson said, "Of course he is," and moved toward an adjoining room. "Come on, Alan."

Demuth was puzzled by the odd glint in Connie's eyes. She seemed frankly bewildered and DeMuth wondered if Pilson had had good sense in inviting him along. He wasn't sure he'd have tendered the same invitation to Pilson.

"In here," Pilson was saying, "we have an improvised make-up room. Wait till you see the stuff." They entered what must have been Miss Craig's bedroom. On the floor was a large parcel which Pilson now unzipped. Inside were vials of vari-colored liquids, putty-like substances, assorted powders and small boxes which now fell over the floor in profusion.

Pilson said, "Watch." He picked up a small can, set it

on a dresser, stripped down, then pressed the sides of the can. A cloud of dark vapor filled the space before him and he stepped into it, rubbing the particles into his pores, much as if he were lathering himself with soap. Before Demuth's eyes Pilson's complexion darkened considerably, as if Pilson had been under health lamps for weeks. When Pilson looked at him, Demuth was surprised to see how blanched the corners of his eyes were, how white his teeth had become.

Next Pilson picked up a piece of putty, added some dark powder and worked it into a mass the same color as his skin. This he applied deftly to his chin, his forehead and nose, watching himself in the mirror over the dresser. He wasn't Pilson any more. The substance blended into his features so well it was impossible to guess where the artificial material began.

"I think that ought to do it," he said, drawing on his clothes. "Now it's your turn." He eyed the make-up materials, frowning. "Perhaps we should lighten your skin, change your hair to black. I can change the pigment of your eyes with this dye. Just a drop in each eye. Instead of blue eyes, you'll have brown."



"No thanks," Demuth said.

"It won't last but a day or two."

"Well . . ." It would be helpful, there was no doubt of that. He could walk right in on Bohannen and Bohannen would never know him. He could kill him. . . . He wondered if, when the opportunity came, he could actually do it. *No time to think about that*, he told himself. *I've committed myself but good*. "All right," he said.

"Hand me that lightener," Pilson said. "Yes, that's the one. Mmm." He looked at the can and then at Demuth. "I don't think it will be too light. Here goes." He squirted the vapor out before Demuth, but Demuth just stood there.

"Take them off," Pilson said, gesturing at him. "Your clothes."

He slid off his clothes and enveloped himself in the particles, rubbing them in the way he had seen Pilson do. When he looked at his arms afterward they looked like anything but his own, and when he looked at himself in the mirror he thought: *I'm so pale I look like I have one foot in the grave*.

"Your nose," Pilson said, slapping the gooey stuff on his nose and working it around.

He gave Demuth a wider, more flaring nose. Demuth thought he looked like a trapped animal. Pilson went on, "Now the eyes. Tilt your head back. Keep your eyes open."

It was difficult, but Demuth managed. The dark drops plunked in, first in the right and then the left, and a world of brown washed in front of him. Pilson gave him a cloth and Demuth dried his eyes. The next look he had in the mirror, he wondered who the man was sitting across from him. But of course it was the new Alan Demuth. He grinned. The effect was startling. It was odd, watching a man you didn't know doing the very same things you were doing.

"There'll be no policeman put a hand on you," Pilson said proudly, beaming at his handiwork. "You'll get to Bohannen easily now."

Demuth jerked around. "Bohannen? How did you know I was trying to get to Bohannen?"

Pilson shrugged. "You told me. Don't you remember?"

At that moment Connie walked in with two cups of coffee. "You'll need these," she said, putting the steaming cups on the dresser. "Are you about ready?"

"Just about," Pilson said,

taking a big healthy swallow.

Demuth took a sip, made a wry face because he'd burned his tongue. "Say, this stuff's hot."

"I'll say it is," Pilson said, drinking a little more and smiling at Connie.

"You'll need it, what you fellows are going to have to do," she said. "I don't know how—"

"Sure," Pilson said, suddenly in a hurry. "Come on, Alan. Drink her down. We've got to be moving."

CHAPTER V

OUTSIDE THE APARTMENT ON the street they commenced walking again and Pilson chuckled. "Nothing to fear now, Alan. Nobody's giving us a second look."

It was true, Demuth was forced to agree. They seemed to have become invisible. All the same, an uneasiness was gnawing at Demuth's mind and try as he might he could not for the life of him ferret out the cause of it.

"Come on," Pilson said, grabbing his arm and quickening his step. It was a cheerful move of a man who has nothing to fear. A confident man. Demuth's uneasiness increased. He wrenched his arm away.

"Wait," he said. "We're both out for different things. You've got your robbery and I have my murder. There's no sense in going together."

Pilson sighed. "You still don't understand. Alone, our senses are halved. Together we are more formidable and more alert. What's more, we can help each other. As far as the robbery is concerned, I can rob somebody at the Testing Center."

Demuth was adamant. "No. I prefer going alone. The way I see it, if we're together the job of the police is simplified. Apart, they must split up their forces, too."

A strange look came into Pilson's eyes, as if lenses were shifting somewhere deep inside, and in that instant Demuth knew what the fear was he'd been riding.

"You've made up your mind?" Pilson said tightly.

"Yes."

Pilson shrugged. "Very well. However, I'll walk part of the way with you."

Now Demuth shrugged in return and started down the street, keeping a wary eye on Pilson and on everything else, too. It had been too easy so far and now he knew the reason why. Pilson kept in step with him and for once had nothing to say.

They walked to an intersection where flyabouts were parked and where there were many people moving about, Altairians, Aquarians, Vegans and Earthmen, all rubbing shoulders. Music drifted over the area from some source deeply hidden, and it was interrupted by a voice which said the time was eight twenty-five. Two hours and twenty-five minutes. It hadn't seemed that long since six o'clock.

One moment they were walking together, silent and with determined step, brushing by others less bent on going somewhere, though it was the hour when people were going to their offices. The next moment Demuth slipped between two flyabout taxis and scurried across the street, threading his way among people bound for the intersection, going back the way he had come.

"Demuth!"

The shout came from behind him and Demuth hurried his step. He had to get away from Pilson if he were to survive. He quickened his step even more, finally broke into a run.

Rounding a corner, he ducked into the first doorway he saw, ran down its length to where it curved right, then took another passageway left,

still another left. This one went down. He stumbled down dark steps, and heard the hiss and whirr of machinery. His eyes became used to the dark and he could make out vague shapes of controls, pipes and masses of machinery for controlling the block.

Quietly he crossed the floor, climbed atop a pipe beneath a window, opened it noiselessly and squeezed through to the outside. He was in an open area, surrounded on all sides by buildings. Fine, he thought. Just fine. There's no escape here except through somebody else's basement window. He decided to rest a minute to catch his breath, but had sat still for only a few minutes before he heard a sound behind him in the room he had just left.

He could not look in the window to see if it was Pilson or not without risking detection, so he moved on tiptoe several windows down, found one that slid open at his touch, slipped inside into a room similar to the one he had left, and locked the window behind him.

"There," he said to himself. "Pilson doesn't know which window I went through, and won't be able to get through the closed and locked window . . . unless . . ." He didn't want

to think about what he feared about Pilson.

COLLECTING HIMSELF, Demuth brushed himself off, went up the stairs to the corridor, took a left, a right, and found himself out on the street again. He started once more in the direction he and Pilson had been pursuing and crossed the intersection to Herculum's large park area, which he would have to cross to get to Bohannen's office.

Here it was quieter, and there were fewer people. He made a beeline for the great mile-high shaft in the center of the park, for behind it on the opposite side of the park was the Testing Center. A look behind him showed him he had been successful in eluding Pilson, and he began to feel good.

As he walked across the park his eyes took in the great column at its center, the top of it lost in the ever-present mist at the top of the dome. Of course that was as it should be. It was the combination of the mist and the translucent dome that filtered the light from the twin suns and made the floor of the city livable. He had been impressed by the shaft when he had first arrived at Herculum, and

one of his first ventures in the flyabout taxi was to fly to the top of it and view the city from the light-bathed platform there. And once he had flown one of the technicians to the top of the column so the technician could take some sort of reading on the outside of the dome, which he had done by going through the lock there to the incredible brilliance beyond it.

The technician could have taken the riser, but said it was slow compared to a flyabout, and Demuth had riveted the technician to his seat the way he thrust upward. The recollection of it made him smile. He'd been a good flyabout taximan, had endured his year of it gracefully, but it wasn't anything he wanted to do for ten years in a row.

"Alan Demuth! Alan Demuth!"

It was a girl's voice and it made him stop on the grass a few hundred feet from the thick shaft. He looked up to see a private flyer hovering overhead, with Connie Craig's head appearing out of the cockpit as she sent the flyer fluttering down.

Demuth waited for nothing. He started to run, wishing he were anywhere but in the park. Was the girl in on it, too? She and Pilson together?

Was she built the way Pilson was? Might be. No wonder those who ventured into criminal status didn't have a chance with creatures like those allied against them.

Now he was on the firm pavement around the shaft. He started to run around it and came face to face with Frank Pilson.

Demuth stopped, uncertain which way to go.

Pilson was smiling, saying, "Well, Alan, it seems we meet again." It wasn't the friendly tone he'd used before.

Pilson didn't seem to want to stop him as Demuth moved to run away, but he said, "It's useless, Alan. There's no escape. Now that you know, there's no sense in carrying the game on any farther. The police will be here in a moment." He glanced to the edge of the park and Demuth followed his gaze. From several directions police flyers, their red lights blinking, were coming slowly.

Demuth turned to Pilson, his mind working furiously, trying to think of some way out of it.

"That little device on your nose keeps sending out those signals," Pilson said, amused. "You could never have escaped. Did you think we were fools?"

"That's not you talking," Demuth said. "Who are you?"

Pilson sighed. "Actually, I'm a Vegan. A sub-lieutenant at the moment. With your capture I might make lieutenant, if they will overlook your discovery. But then, this is only the second time. It was fun while it lasted, as long as I was with you, but of course we couldn't allow you to get near Mr. Bohannen."

"Where are you?"

"At police headquarters. Would you say mine was a rather convincing portrayal?"

Pride, Demuth thought, *goeth before a fall*, and he rushed Pilson in such a frenzy of action that Pilson barely had time to get his hands up to ward off the feet Demuth brought up heavily on his chest. Demuth fell to the pavement but was not hurt, but Pilson smashed up against the gleaming metal of the shaft and his head hit an outcropping of it a resounding blow.

Beneath Pilson's torn scalp Demuth could see metal.

As I thought, he told himself. *A high order robot. I should have known.*

Pilson came up in a flurry of action, intent on getting Demuth into those arms of his. Demuth, hoping his human responses were as good as

those of the Vegan who was operating Pilson from headquarters, jumped aside and, seeing the great number of flyabouts converging on the site, ran for the entrance to the shaft.

Just inside was the riser with its doors open, for which he was thankful—nobody at the top. He jumped in and activated it. As it rose and the doors wooshed shut, Pilson shot through, struggled to get all of him squeezed in beyond the jaws that were the doors. Pilson's leg didn't quite make it. With a shriek of twisting metal, the leg was severed just above the knee.

CHAPTER VI

PILSON SAT on the floor of the cage, the snagged leg useless, trailing battered pieces of metal and wires. But Pilson appeared unconcerned. He grinned at Demuth. "Think you will escape now, Alan?"

Demuth glared. "Why didn't you arrest me five minutes after we left the instructions room? Why all this?"

Pilson didn't lose his grin. "You miss the point of the criminal game. Besides, it's not often we get a chance to capture a murderer—or should I say a would-be murderer?

We wanted to let you go as far as we thought safe."

"That's just this far, isn't it?"

"Yes. No farther."

The riser went up gently, with hardly a sound to mark its passage.

Finally Pilson said, "What tipped you off, Alan? I swear I wasn't expecting you to duck away from me like that."

"Your remark about Bohannen. That was a start."

Pilson nodded soberly. "That was a slip, wasn't it?"

"Then there was the coffee. You drank it down when it was too hot for a human being to stand. I burned my tongue on it. Thanks to Connie Craig for serving it that way."

Pilson was thoughtful. "I should have known. I will have to remember that."

"Is she one of you?"

"What?"

"Is Connie Craig one of you?"

"There are many of us," Pilson said with an inscrutable smile.

Demuth forced his thoughts away from Pilson and things that might be (it was difficult, though, trying to wrench his mind away from Connie Craig), and gave himself up to thinking about what he'd do when the riser reached the top of the shaft. He heard the

barely perceptible sough of air as the cage rose, and wondered how far upward they had already come.

"The police will be waiting at the top," Pilson said, "if that's what you're thinking. Some of them are there already."

Demuth said nothing, but he understood why Pilson did not try to hold him physically. What use would it be when the flyabouts would be at the top of the platform, just waiting to haul him in? He glanced at the controls, and Pilson's grin broadened.

"Up or down," Pilson said. "It really makes no difference. You're caught in a cage. It makes my work easier. And don't try stalling the cage. If you do you will regret it."

There was no denying it; Pilson would be the victor in any test of strength. Human muscle was no match for the strength of metal.

The gentle purr of the cage tapered off to complete silence and the riser's doors hissed open. Demuth had expected to see the top platform of the shaft, but the doors opened to a corridor.

"After you," Pilson said, getting up on his one leg and leaning against the cage's wall, taking little jumps toward the door.

Demuth walked out into the bright corridor. It curved to the left and he followed it into ever-increasing whiteness around to the opposite side, where it opened out to a level place that blinded him at first after the subdued light of the car. A dozen feet away it stopped. Beyond that there was nothing—nothing, that is, except hovering police flyers a few yards away from the iridescence of the dome itself. It hurt his eyes to look that way, but he forced himself to, squinting, and saw the flyers start to head in toward the platform.

Something else caught Demuth's eyes. Beyond the flyers he saw Connie's craft, and he wondered what she was still doing there. No doubt watching to make sure he was finally taken into custody.

Well, you couldn't always win, and those suns out there beyond the dome were going to be awfully hot. For a short time, anyway. After that he wouldn't feel the heat any more.

HE TOOK a step toward the outside platform, glanced to his left to see Pilson hopping on his one foot, wires and metal dangling from the other, a grotesque figure of a

man. And beyond Pilson he saw something he hadn't seen before. The corridor continued around that side and there was a door.

A door to where?

Pilson now hopped a little in front of him, and Demuth, keeping his senses, sauntered reluctantly behind, watching the flyers moving within feet of the platform. He could see the smirking faces of Altairians, Vegans, a few Earthmen and one Aquarian, all uniformed, and all waiting to take him back.

"The whole police department mobilized to capture one man," Demuth said bitterly.

Pilson poised on his one foot. "As I've said, we don't get a chance to do this every day."

"You must be very proud," Demuth said tightly.

Pilson managed a shrug. "You were committed to the act. We were committed to your capture."

"And if I'd done it and managed to escape until tomorrow, I'd have been congratulated. It's ironic."

"No. You'd have proved your point and you would have had your reward, those fifty points upgrading for your superiority." A ghost of a smile flickered on his face. "A superiority, I might add,

which existed only in your mind." He sighed. "That's the trouble with you fellows who hope to show us a thing or two."

"Do you always send so many men after one man?"

Pilson hobbled closer to the edge. "It depends upon the nature of the crime contemplated."

In that instant, with Pilson so confident, Demuth summoned up his reserve strength, rushed savagely at Pilson, and hit him hard with his shoulder. Though the blow was softened by his own shoulder muscles, the jar of contact was a shattering one and he winced with the pain of it.

Pilson fell, rolled toward the edge of the platform, trying to scramble to a sitting position, putting out his one good foot to stop himself, his hands spread-eagled. He slid farther, nearly stopped, tottered, then disappeared over the edge.

Demuth did not wait to see what would happen next but ducked back into the corridor the way they had come. He ran around to the riser, hardly able to see in the softer light, and went in. He wrenched off the artificial nose Pilson had attached, felt smarting flesh where it had held so well, and felt too the

hard object within it, the signaling device that told the authorities where he was at all times. He threw it to the floor and nimbly leaped from the car just as it started its descent, nearly catching his foot in the doors as they swished closed.

He turned right this time and ran around to where he had spied the door. It opened easily, and he went through it and closed it gently behind him. Before him was a narrow, dimly lighted corridor that curved downward. He grinned. At least he'd hold them off a while this way.

CHAPTER VII

HE HURRIED down the corridor, knowing the flyers would be at the platform now and police officers would be jumping out and running around to the riser. They'd find it in use and would assume he'd taken it to the ground. Then they'd rush out, get in their flyers and go down to wait for him to emerge at ground level. Unless somebody thought to open the door to the corridor going down. In which case he'd better be quiet in his descent.

He took off his shoes and ran down the corridor in his

stockinged feet, hearing only the whistle of the stale air by his ears. If somebody opened the door at the top, he wouldn't know it. He stopped for a few moments to listen, but heard nothing.

No, nobody would be opening that door, nobody would be thinking he went down this way. Why should they when the signal device was in the riser?

After a few minutes he slowed to a walk. There was no sense in rushing to the ground. As soon as they saw he wasn't on the riser they'd start up the sloping floor for him, perhaps send somebody up to the top to start down. *No*, he told himself, *my troubles aren't over yet, even though I'm sure Pilson must be dead—or as dead as a robot can get. And that Vegan at police headquarters will be out of a job for a while.*

He maintained his slow progress down the slope, noting now that the curve was not nearly so extreme as it had been. The shaft was getting larger. He wondered how far down the shaft he actually was, wished there were windows or doors so that he could look out.

Ultimately he came to a level place where a door opened to the inner wall. He

opened it, looked down the dark shaft, saw nothing. Probably an opening used for an emergency exit or repairs. On the other side was a door to the outer wall, and his heart jumped at the sight of it. If he could get outside he might evade searchers on the way up—or down. Except, of course, that they would open the door just as he had done and there he'd be.

Or would he?

He opened it to see a ledge only a few feet wide, the air behind him rushing by to get out. He stepped out on the ledge and looked at the ground from a dizzying height. There were specks that looked like flyers down there but he couldn't be sure at this height.

"Alan!"

He nearly toppled from the ledge. He had been so busy looking down he did not see the flyer above him. He looked up now to see Connie Craig wave at him.

HE WAVED BACK. If she were with them, all was lost. But all seemed lost anyway, so what was the difference? If he could get in her flyer without the police's knowledge, he could take it away from her and escape. It depended on

Connie. He'd have to pretend to go along. He forced himself to smile as he saw the hovering flyer inch closer to the ledge.

"For a moment I thought it was you who went over the edge," Connie was saying, manipulating the controls to steady the craft in the winds around the shaft. "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right."

He waited as she maneuvered the craft within two feet of the edge, surprised at the able way she handled the controls, then leaped to the flyer, which bobbed at this new weight. Connie kept busy trying to compensate for it.

When the craft was steady, he said, "All right, now let me have the controls."

"What?" she said, turning to him in genuine surprise. "Why?"

He grabbed her arm and pulled her from the seat. She fought him with her fists, the flyer dipping and careening.

"You're a fool!" she cried.

But he said nothing as he edged himself into the seat. There was no sense in taking chances. She might guide the craft right into the arms of the law and that would be the end. It simply had to be done this way.

Once in the pilot's seat he

turned the craft so he could look down. The flyers at the base of the shaft seemed un-mindful of this solitary craft halfway to the dome. Good. He hadn't drawn attention. Next he eased the flyer carefully and slowly away from the shaft.

Connie's lips were shut tight and her eyes were hostile as she said, "A fine one you are. I should never have bothered."

"You were Frank Pilson's

girlfriend and Pilson was one of them." He shot her a look. "What does that make you?"

"That makes me hate you because you've jumped to such a conclusion. You must be quite stupid."

"That's easy to say."

"It's also easy to prove."

"How?"

"Yesterday I was asked if I wanted to participate in today's criminal hunt—on the side of the law."

"I thought so."



"Will you let me finish?"

He shrugged. "I suppose there's no way to stop you." Now that the urgency of the action at the shaft was over, he was becoming more conscious of her nearness.

"You're impossible," she said, turning her head away.

"All right. I promise to listen."

She turned back and smoothed her skirt thoughtfully before she said, "As I said, I was asked if I wanted

to take part in the game, help the authorities. I have a dull office job and I jumped at the chance for the day off. But before I did I asked what I'd have to do, and they told me all I'd have to do was provide a rendezvous for two police officers who would arrive shortly after six and don disguises. I was to help all I could, that's all. I knew one of the men would be Frank Pilson because he was the one who came to Mr. Bohannen's



office to ask me. I thought it was quite excit—"

"Bohannen's office!" Demuth interrupted. So that's where he'd seen her before! Of course. "You work in Bohannen's office!"

"Of course I do," she said stiffly. "Is there anything wrong in that?"

"Only that I must murder him, that's all. Didn't you know that?"

"Not then, I didn't. I've heard it since on the radio and the tridimensional. They've caught everybody but you, did you know that?"

CHAPTER VIII

THE FLYABOUT mingled with the others over the city, sank slowly to the lower levels and ultimately landed atop Connie's apartment house. As casually as two people would ordinarily move from a flyer, they emerged and moved to the riser, taking it to Connie's floor. Demuth waited for a moment in front of the door while Connie went in and came out, saying there was no one inside.

There was no alternative but to trust her. Demuth turned, entered, and found she was not lying.

He locked the door and sprawled wearily in a chair,

glad for a chance for respite.

"You need something to eat," she said, glancing at the wall clock. "It's after noon."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I can always eat. What I want to know is about Bohannen."

She took a chair nearby and gazed at him without expression. She said, "I'll do all I can to help, but must you kill him?"

"Yes. If I don't, I'll lose my life outside the dome."

"But why? Why have you set yourself on this course?"

"Because he's getting a percentage of I don't know how many people's weekly credits for upgrading them."

She stared, lips parted. Then she blinked her eyes, closed her mouth firmly and said, "I don't believe it."

He leaned forward. "You mean you work right there in his office and don't know this?"

"Of course. Mr. Bohannen has been nothing but fair to us all in the office. It doesn't make any difference whether we're Altarian, Aquarian, Vegan or of Earth."

Demuth grinned. "You're not only beautiful, you're naive."

A spot of red showed in her cheeks. "I may be naive," she said slowly.

"You saw me there yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Just after I came out of his office?"

"Yes."

"Would you like to know what he said to me just before I came out?"

She said nothing, so he went on. "I went to him because my record was so low—"

"Everybody," she interrupted, "thinks his score—"

"I'm not that stupid. If it was a little lower than what I know it should be, I wouldn't have become suspicious, but it was hardly half that. When I talked to him about it he said everybody has to make a living, he'd be here only ten years, and he had to make all he could during those years. He asked me for ten per cent of what I'd make each year; in return, he would upgrade me to the level I wanted."

She shook her head wonderingly. "It's incredible!"

"It's not only incredible," he said, "it's also dishonest."

"I know a lot of people come to see him, but . . ."

"A lot of people are paying him that ten per cent. He's getting rich." He darted her a look. "Are you sure you didn't know anything about this?"

"Of course I'm sure. After all, there are seven of us in the office. The machine handles the tests, and Mr. Bohannan reviews them, adjusts the final grade in each division and affixes the possible statuses. From our office the records go to the status office where the occupational specialties are affixed. Then these are duplicated and the originals returned."

"It could be," Demuth said. "You seven are just clerks."

"We file the records away, and that's no easy job. Filing information on two hundred thousand people is a full time job for just seven people."

"Can you see that it is possible, though?"

"Yes," she said soberly, "I can." She looked up and her eyes held a different kind of look. Demuth wanted to think it was a look of admiration. "Are you sure you won't have something to eat?"

"Yes, I'm sure. What I want to know now is why you got in your flyabout and followed us to the park."

Connie smiled. "So I'm still suspect?" Her teeth were remarkably white and straight. In fact, she was so perfect in every way Demuth had a sudden uneasiness, the same uneasiness he'd had about Pilson. On impulse he got up from

his chair, walked over to her, took her by the arm, lifted her from the chair and kissed her.

IT WAS a long kiss and Connie did not protest during it. Quite otherwise. She answered it warmly. Demuth could feel her quickening heart. Or was it his own?

"Satisfied?" she said, stepping away, her face flushed, her eyes mocking. "I'm not like Pilson at all."

He grinned, feeling foolish and pleased at the same time. "I guess not." Then he added, "How did you know about him?"

"Nobody drinks coffee like that. Not my coffee, anyway."

Demuth sank down in the chair again. "That's when I tumbled, too. I found out later he was being operated by a Vegan at headquarters. But you still haven't said—"

"About my flyer? That's easy. As soon as I saw you I knew you weren't a police officer because you'd only taken the test the day before and had words with Mr. Bohannen, though I didn't know you had applied for criminal status. Then here in this room, the way Pilson acted, the way he monopolized the conversation and handled things, made me suspicious.

And then it dawned on me that you didn't know."

She stopped and Demuth glanced at her to find her face turned away. "Then what?"

Her eyes came around, slid to his. "Then I decided to help you, decided to tell you my suspicion about him. I couldn't do it when you two were together, and when I saw you in the park alone I tried to contact you, but you only ran away."

He said levelly, "Why did you want to help me?" He was rewarded by the flush that came over her face.

She managed to say, "I thought you were being taken, that's all. I've always been for the underdog."

"Thank you. I'm sorry I said you were naive."

"I guess I was, if what you say about Mr. Bohannen is true."

"I knew him on Earth. He always managed to wriggle out of things, always had half a dozen schemes going."

She said thoughtfully, "He's taking an awful chance with the records. If there should be an investigation—"

"They'd find nothing. Don't you see? He gimmicks the score any way he wishes, waits for the gripe, then puts his proposition to the applicant. Sometimes he waits a

year, as he did in my case, knowing I wouldn't want another year of flying taxis. The applicant is always willing to pay for it—or nearly always, I'd guess. All Bohannen has to do in most cases is put down what should have been there in the first place."

"You didn't come across, as you say."

"No, and I suspect there are others who have refused. Possibly many, some of whom have taken to criminal status in an effort to win upgrading without benefit of Bohannen. But how would one go about discovering who these people are when there are two hundred thousand records to go through?"

"I could look at yours. I know how to interpret the tape. I could see if he's done it right."

"When?"

Connie frowned. "I see what you mean. I don't go back to work until tomorrow. By that time you could be dead on the sand."

CHAPTER IX

AT THAT MOMENT the annunciator sounded and they jumped at the sudden raucous sound. The face of the Vegan was at the door-viewer.

Recovering, Connie rose and went to the door, but motioned Demuth to one side beyond the range of the scanner before she activated it. "Yes?" she said calmly.

"Herculum police, Miss Craig," the high-pitched voice said. "Open up."

Getting just the right note of indignation in her voice, she said, "Am I under arrest?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then why must I open the door? What right have you to ask entry?"

The Vegan was patient. "Criminal Alan Demuth was traced to your apartment, Miss. If you don't open the door immediately, I'm afraid we'll have to come through it."

"Very well," Connie said, stepping out of range and darting a what-do-we-do-now look at Demuth.

He nodded for her to open the door.

She did.

At once three persons entered—two Vegans and an Altarian—and as Connie stepped to one side, Demuth rushed toward them.

The three police officers lifted their guns, but the presence of Connie and the suddenness of Demuth's attack tipped the balance in his

favor. He collided with them and caromed out the door, managing to catch the edge of it in his hand and slam it after him.

He heard the door jerk open, heard the steps behind him as he raced down the hall. Then he felt the heat of the blast past his head, saw the hole it made in the wall toward which he was rushing. He turned abruptly just as another blast reached him, nicking his shoulder and spinning him to the floor.

He lunged to his feet in the doorway, still another blast slamming the corridor's end wall, sending debris into his neck. The odor of burnt wood filled the air. The feet were closer now.

Demuth raced up the stairs three at a time, and by the time he had gone up two flights he was so winded he didn't think he could make the last one. At the landing to the final flight he spied a large metal barrel. He did not stop to think what it contained or why it was there, but put his shoulder behind it and sent it crashing down the stairs. It bumped down, rolled around on the landing, started to roll down the next flight. He heard a high-pitched warning cry from the Vegan and a moment later a bone-shattering crunch

as the barrel smashed into one of them.

He did not wait to see and hear but opened the cupola door and ran across the roof to Connie's flyabout. Thankful she had not objected to his leaving the keys in it, he slid into the seat, kicked it into motion, and was just rising when he saw the figures burst out on the roof, their guns in their hands. He depressed the accelerator all the way, shoved the steering mechanism upward and to the right. Screaming into the air, the flyer shuddered under the demand for sudden power. Then he was weaving among the afternoon flyers, for the moment safe, but only for a moment. They'd be after him and the flyer before long. He'd have to get rid of it.

He had just had the thought when he saw the flashing red lights of approaching flyers. He dropped the craft like a plummet atop a building, got out and raced to the cupola, down the stairs and out to the street.

He walked with studied leisureliness. It was two o'clock. He wondered if he'd elude them until six the next morning. Not the way things were going. They were after him in earnest, probably had the whole force working on it.

"Alan Demuth," he heard from a radio in a shop he passed, "continues to remain at large. Residents of Herculum are urged to be on the lookout for a light-complexioned Earthman six feet tall, brown eyes, black hair cut short . . ." And he passed out of hearing.

What chance did a man have?

HE WALKED with unconcern toward the park and the great shaft so recently the scene of police action. There were few people on the greensward, and those who were paid him little notice. He kept to the outer edges so that he could dart across the streets and lose himself in the busier sections if he were spotted.

He was successful all the way across the park, which took him the better part of an hour, only to find a cluster of policemen before the entrance to the Testing Center. He also saw a number of other people—too many for this time of day—in various casual poses and activities nearby: a gardener, a man sweeping the street, flyabout taxis with nearly dozing drivers, several private flyers, saunterers and groups having conversations.

Well, Alan Demuth, he

told himself, there goes your chance to murder Bohannen. How could anyone expect to commit a crime of this nature when Herculum's finest were out en masse to circumvent it? There would have to be some other way. He lay in the dense foliage near the street looking at the building and the people there for a long time trying to figure it out.

There obviously could be no entry from the ground. The building, however, was only half a dozen stories tall. He could land on the roof. But how? And what if the roof was as well guarded? But that would have to be the chance he'd take. He'd simply have to go back, get Connie's flyer and fly it over the building, somehow drop from it, make them think he'd gone on in the flyabout. The machine would continue on until it crashed into the dome. That would give the ever-vigilant repair crews something to do, plugging the hole it would make.

He retraced his steps back across the park, hiding in bushes several times as pairs of policemen strolled by. If he could find a lone policeman he could waylay him and confiscate his uniform, but in pairs it wasn't worth the chance.

Ultimately he reached the building on top of which he had left the flyabout, and he made it to the roof without incident, torn with uncertainty because there might be somebody there guarding it and hoping he'd return. Then, too, they might have returned it to Connie or impounded it—any number of things might have happened. But he found it untended among several others parked on the rooftop, and clambered inside, resting there for a few minutes to regain his breath and review what he intended to do.

It had been nearly twelve hours ago that he had been instructed by the Vegan police chief in the gathering place at headquarters, twelve hours since he had so innocently accepted the comradeship of Frank Pilson. In those twelve hours his eagerness to have done with the job had all but evaporated. Now all he had left was dogged determination, and the only reason he was able to hang onto that was the thought of all the people Bohannen had made miserable by his demands for credits in exchange for upgrading. If it had been a simple matter of personal revenge, he doubted that he would have lasted this long, but the thought of the others made him grit his teeth

and vow to erase the testing chief.

"If I don't do it," he said to himself silently, "there will be a host of others after me who will be offered upgrading at a price, and they'll work out their years in bondage to him. I've got to succeed. For the good of Herculum, I must."

Thus counseled, Demuth activated the flyabout and rose slowly from the roof, took several deep breaths and turned the flyer toward Bohannen's office. He knew he would be sighted before he got very far, but this time he didn't care. This time it didn't matter. The unexpectedness of it, the boldness—he was counting on these to help him.

FOR A FULL MINUTE he glided along in the direction of Bohannen's headquarters without attracting any attention. Then he saw the flash of red a few blocks before him and knew it was about to begin. Looking behind him, he saw three police flyers moving up fast. He grinned. He hadn't been a flyabout taximan for nothing. The only question was whether or not Connie's flyabout would hold together for what he planned to do with it.

Now there were half a dozen flyers converging on him. Suddenly he jammed the flyer, full throttle, into a long sweep to the right, felt himself pressed hard against the seat as it moved in a sharp arc. Just as quickly he shifted his course to the left, aiming at the top of the shaft, not caring now who or how many were behind him.

He braked suddenly near the top of the dome. In the blinding haze there he turned to meet the many flyers now moving in from all directions. Carefully sighting where he thought the Testing Center would be below him, he aimed the craft a few blocks short of it, and at full power darted toward it. The wind rose from a dull woosh to a high whine before he came upon the rising flyers who now scattered before his charge. At the calculated distance before the Testing Center he leveled off, braked shudderingly, opened the door, and with his hands on the controls for the last maneuver, shoved them out of phase and jumped lightly from the craft as it went by the roof.

He sprawled there as the flyabout kept on going. He grinned as its receding shape gyrated wildly upward as if out of control. *Let them chase*

that for a while, he thought, noting with satisfaction the pack of police flyers in hot pursuit.

On the roof there was nothing—yet. Should there have been? As if in answer, the roof cupola door was opening, and Demuth just managed to sprint behind it before two Altairians in uniform came running out, their guns drawn.

He darted around the door and, hearing a scramble behind him as he entered the doorway, knew he had been sighted. The Altairians exchanged excited cries in their own tongue and came for him. Demuth stepped to one side of the doorway and let them come. The first one came through the door, gave a surprised shout when he saw no one upon the stairs, but had no opportunity for anything else because Demuth stepped from beside the door and sent him bumping down the steps to lie in a crumpled heap at the bottom.

The second Altairian did not come in, having seen what had happened to his companion. Demuth chanced a look through the door, saw him standing out on the roof, his gun coming up for a shot at him. Demuth ducked back behind the protection of the

jamb, looked down the stairs, and wondered if he'd make it.

Still, there was nothing to be gained standing where he was, letting the Altairian give an alarm. He darted out and down the stairs, hearing the scurry of footsteps behind him, expecting any moment to be shot in the back. He jumped over the prostrate Altairian, and made himself as small a target as possible as he lay on the next set of stairs and grasped the fallen Altairian's gun.

Sighting up the stairs, he pressed off a shot that sent his pursuer off his feet and crashing down the stairs to join the other police officer on the landing.

Demuth rose to a sitting position, his gun at the ready, waiting for whatever action this violence would trigger. But all was quiet; he saw nothing in the corridor at the bottom of the second set of stairs, heard nothing.

Cautiously holding his gun ever at the ready, he stepped lightly down the stairs, poked his head out into the corridor, and saw that it was deserted. But of course it would be, being so near six. Office hours ended at five, but Bohannen had promised to be in his office until six. However, Bohannen's office was on

the floor below. The numbers here were in the five hundreds; Bohannen's office was 401.

He gingerly made his way down the stair well to the floor below, uneasy because he saw no one and could not believe this should be his good fortune. His uneasiness grew as he made his way down the hall to Bohannen's office.

Here the door was open and Demuth knew this shouldn't be. It was too easy. He went out into the hall again, saw no one, heard nothing, so he went back in, filled with the wonder of it. Of all places, he expected the office to be overrun with police. Still, it could be that Bohannen had every confidence in the men stationed below and on the roof.

Feeling he was walking at the edge of a precipice, Demuth stepped softly to the inner office door and flung it open.

No one was there. Like an eye looking at him was the empty chair behind the desk where Bohannen should have been.

"Don't move!"

Demuth froze where he was. That was not an Altairian's voice, nor an Aquarian's or a Vegan's. It was the voice of an Earthman.

Where had he been hiding?

CHAPTER X

BEHIND YOU, Mr. Demuth," the voice went on, "are a number of police officers. They would enjoy it if you would make some sort of attempt to get out of here. Would you like to try?"

The voice belonged to Bohannen. Since he didn't have eyes in the back of his head, Demuth couldn't tell whether he was telling the truth or not, so he did nothing.

"You may turn around now—slowly."

Demuth turned and saw Bohannen to one side and six police officers—two Vegans, two Aquarians, an Earthman and an Altairian. They didn't look as if they appreciated what he had done up on the stairway to the roof.

"What took you so long?" Bohannen said, coming toward him. "We expected you long ago and I was getting impatient. It's after six, you know, and I was on the point of going home."

Demuth saw his grinning face as Bohannen put out his hand for the gun. He could have killed Bohannen right then and there, but he'd have been killed in the process and he couldn't bring himself to do it as long as there was a chance he might still win.

When Demuth hesitated to hand over the gun, Bohannen chided, "Now, now, Alan, you wouldn't want me to tell the boys to commence firing, would you?"

"You're rotten," Demuth said between his teeth. "I should kill you."

"You'd never press the trigger," Bohannen said.

Demuth sighed, let him take the gun. So this was the way it was going to be: Bohannen victorious, Demuth frying under a double sun in Herculium's dry as dust sand.

Other police officers were coming in now and the room was full of them.

"Sit down, Alan," Bohannen said, indicating a chair, "might as well be comfortable while we're waiting for the police chief. He wants to come over and congratulate you, did you know that? He asked me to let him know when you arrived. He thinks a lot of you, really he does. After all, he expected to capture you early this morning."

"Is he in on this, too? Is he as crooked as you are?"

Bohannen hoisted his rump to a desk and sat, one foot on the floor, the other dangling, saying, "Crooked, Alan? I don't understand you. Are you implying that I'm not honest?"

"You know damn well you're not honest. You're running a game here on Herculum to get all you can while you can."

Bohannen snorted. "Hear that, boys? I think Demuth's suddenly gone out of his head."

"How about all the rest of the guys who're paying you for the upgrading they're entitled to anyway? Are they out of their heads?"

"You're talking nonsense."

"I think an auditing of your records would show how right I am."

"Think so?" Bohannen was amused. "You forget that I'm the Testing Chief, Alan. Nothing can be done without my consent. It just so happens that you're like all the rest of the disgruntled people who feel they're entitled to upgrading simply because they exist. Only in your case it's gone to your brain and you had to apply for criminal status, which shows how far gone you are."

"Not according to what you told me in your office."

Bohannen laughed. "Jeff Branner got in touch with me, told me what you said in his office. Herculum is laughing at you, Alan, did you know that? Everyone knows the machines are never wrong,

that those who work in the Testing Center are above reproach."

"The machines may not be wrong but the human element is."

"My clerks are dependable."

"Even if you're not, is that it?"

Bohannen sighed wearily. "A charge of malfeasance is a serious one. Where you're going it won't be possible for you to make it, unfortunately for you. Not that it would have stood up had you been able to make it."

Demuth said levelly, "I'm not there yet."

"You will be, Alan," Bohannen said with quiet confidence. "You will be."

AT THAT MOMENT the Vegan chief of police walked through the office door, followed by several other important-looking officers.

"Glad to see you," Bohannen said, rising. "Here is your man."

The Vegan's wings shuddered a little, then shifted themselves to lie close to his back as he viewed Demuth with an unwinking eye.

"You gave us quite a time, Demuth."

"My only regret is that I wasn't successful."

The Vegan gave a very human-like shrug. "That's understandable." He seemed in no hurry to take Demuth. "You are aware of the consequences."

Demuth nodded, said dryly, "I'm afraid so. You explained it quite well this morning." For some reason he felt elated, as if this weren't the very end. Something about the Vegan's stance, the way he was looking at him. "When will I be going?"

"I'm not sure," the Vegan said. "But of this you can be sure: Those who break the laws of Herculum must be expelled. Our rigid economy does not permit the survival of those whose actions run counter to the best interests of the station colony."

Demuth's pulse quickened. Why was the Vegan saying this to him?

The police chief now turned to Bohannen. "Isn't that true, sir?"

Bohannen nodded, though his face was blanched. Then it darkened and he said, "I hardly think this is the time for speeches. Will you please take Demuth out of here? It is long past my regular hours."

The Vegan turned and called to someone in the hallway. "Please let Miss Craig in."

Connie came through the door, looking every bit as lovely as Demuth remembered her to be, and her eyes slid around the room until they lighted on Demuth. Her face broke into a smile and she came to him, saying, "Alan," and reaching for his hand.

"One moment, Miss Craig," the Vegan said. "You have the records?"

"Oh, yes." She handed a packet to him. Demuth hadn't noticed it before.

The police chief looked at the packet gravely. "We are very much indebted to Miss Craig," he said. "If she hadn't had the courage to come here this afternoon, things might have gone on the same as they have."

"What are you talking about?" Bohannen said sourly. But Demuth saw the sweat beginning to collect on his forehead.

"I shall be very glad to tell you," the Vegan went on. "In the beginning we asked Miss Craig to cooperate with us for a day because we needed a place for rendezvous for Frank Pilson, one of our puppet humanoid operatives, who was to befriend Mr. Demuth at the instruction session this morning. Everything worked out fine, except that Mr. Demuth proved to be much

smarter than his test record would indicate. He discovered that Mr. Pilson was being operated from headquarters. Miss Craig made the discovery about the same time.

"Demuth should have been captured and Miss Craig left with nothing to do for the rest of the day. But neither happened. Demuth outwitted Pilson and his control and Miss Craig sought out Demuth to try to help him. During this time Demuth told her his suspicions and she did a little detective work of her own. She had no difficulty getting in here, of course."

The Vegan patted the packet in his hand. "She found what she was looking for this afternoon, Bohannen, while you were so worried about Demuth. You didn't notice her. The record of Alan Demuth is right here, a record incorrectly graded and bearing the grader's initials—yours, Bohannen."

"There must be some mistake," Bohannen spluttered.

"There was a mistake, all right," the Vegan went on relentlessly. "It was yours for ever thinking up the nefarious practice you've been carrying on. You see, Miss Craig, satisfied that Demuth was telling the truth, also picked up the file of men and women who

are paying you for the up-grading they deserved in the first place."

"Now look here," Bohannen said, his face white, starting forward after the packet. "I'm the Testing Chief and those are my private records. You have no right to them."

The Vegan said coolly, "You were the Testing Chief. I have as of this moment relieved you of the office. As for these records, we have every right to confiscate them. Furthermore, if anyone's going through the lock to the fiery outside, it's you. I'm sure the judges in the Hall of Justice will concur in this decision. I'm certain, too, the Hall will find Herculum owes Demuth his life for what he has uncovered. I only wonder how many men and women have been forced to assume criminal status because you have refused to upgrade them without benefit of a share of their earnings."

Bohannen, very ugly, said, "That will have to be proved." Before anyone could stop him, he fired the gun he had taken from Demuth point-blank at the Vegan chief, then rushed for the hall.

DEMUTH sprinted to follow, narrowly escaping being hit

by some of the shots made by policemen who had moved far into the room. He reached the door, and saw Bohannen running down the corridor.

Putting everything he had in it, Demuth rushed after him, aided by the knowledge that he could quite lawfully take Bohannen now. He miraculously dodged the shots Bohannen sent back after him, and at last, before they reached the steps, made a flying tackle that crumpled Bohannen at the foot of the stairway. Demuth had crept down so carefully a half hour before.

Bohannen tried in vain to bring the gun to bear, but Demuth, in a final wrenching of Bohannen's arm, sent it flying in an arc over the bannister and clattering down the stairs.

They came and picked up Bohannen and led him away. The Vegan, who had suffered only a few singed feathers, came up with Connie and said, "Feel better now, Mr. Demuth?"

"Much better, thank you," Demuth said, still winded.

"Miss Craig has told me your real score," the Vegan said. "I should think it would entitle you to a good job—Bohannen's, perhaps. I will speak to Jeff Branner about it."

Demuth grinned and said, "Thanks." He turned to Connie, who had slipped her hand into his. "There's another responsibility I'm thinking of assuming," he said.

The Vegan smiled, as much as a Vegan can smile, and his wings fluttered ever so slightly.

"I'm sure that can be worked out, too, if both parties are willing. However, that is something you will have to find out for yourself."

"I intend to," Demuth said, taking her arm and walking down the corridor. "What do you say, Connie?"

"If you get Mr. Bohannen's job, you'll be in charge of provisional status." She smiled up at him. "I don't think there's much I can do about mine." Then she squeezed his arm, saying, "Not that I would have it otherwise."



✱ **The next SFA goes on sale January 7!** ✱

MAN OVERBOARD

by ALEX KIRS

*Were they dreams—the memories
of places he'd never been in
and people he'd never known?
Or was "reality" a dream?*

Illustrated by John Martinez

TERRIFIED, he ran through the evil, fog-thick, echoing night. He raced breathless down twisting, tortuous streets, through stinking alleys where shapeless masses sprawled, acrawl with scuttling, watchful bugs. He slipped, feet juddering on the rain-slick cobblestones. His frantic eyes strained through the black and diffused gray of the night, avoiding with a shudder the yellow cones of light spilling from the street lamps to reflect from the wet, slimy pavement.

Those he fled from were hot behind him but still holding back; he could sense their confidence in their other thousands who waited for him at every place in which he might seek sanctuary. There was nothing to do but run; run and hope that somewhere, somehow, there might be an opening in the remorseless net closing surely around him.

He burst from a side street, heavy shoes clattering an insane rhythm as he slewed and skidded to a stop, jerking his head from side to side, fran-



tically seeking another route. The avenue in front of him was much too bright; he dared not run the additional risk of being too clearly visible. With a whimper, he dashed headlong into the nearest alley.

Feline shapes with feral eyes crouched and arched and loped silently along the top of the alley's fence, to snarl, spit and reach out for his eyes with septic claws. He stumbled heedlessly over something soft and wetly yielding, and the hand he extended to break his fall brushed something bristly and electrical that swiped at him, faster than thought.

Bleeding, he staggered from the alley's end into the street.

It stretched before him, dark and dim, and he was running down it in full flight before he noticed that the walls on either side were absolutely featureless, unmarked by doorways or windows. The clattering crescendo of his footsteps trailed off, dribbled into silence. With his heart a dreadful, aching drum in his chest, he stood motionless.

The blank walls went up, up, and disappeared into the fog. Ahead, they continued along the street for half a block, then they and the street were cut off by a vertical blackness that was not a wall.

Suddenly, there were eyes at his back, like hairy hands scrabbling for a grip, and he whirled to face them. Shadows loomed out of the pressing fog, curiously low and strangely squat, just too far away to be clearly seen. He whined inaudibly and backed away from them towards the black nothingness where the street ended.

Then, just like that, he knew what was happening and what would happen. *I've seen all this before*, he thought. *It's a copy of an ancient film taken in the days when there was a London and an Earth, and I saw it back in civilization somewhere, in a reconstruction of a pre-atomic theatre.* Only the shadows and the blank walls and the empty blackness were different, but he knew about them, too.

I'm dreaming, he said to himself, feeling a maniac impulse to giggle because everything was so simple. He was supposed to back away from the advancing shadows, back and back until he came to the black nothingness, where he would suddenly stumble and fall, screaming and retching, backwards into Eternity or Outer Space or Death—but certainly into his bed on Henderson's Planet, where he would wipe the cold sweat

from his face, smoke a cigarette, and wonder about the dream.

The squat, inhuman shadows were closing in. Abruptly, he turned his back on them and ran, confident now, towards the black End. *Might as well get it over with*, he thought. In the split instant before he reached the blackness, he said aloud, in a ludicrous parody of old-time Cockney, "Cor, but they won't scrag me now, not 'arf. Ta-ta, dear booming beasties; you'll never catch old Dom Hagar, now!"

That was when he screamed, a thin threadlike thing of terror and revulsion and utter rejection that sat him up in his bed, wide awake, to bury his face in his hands. After a long, shuddering silence, he forced his voice out through a throat still raw and dry from the scream.

"My name is Anton Cord," he said, trying for calmness but achieving nothing but flat hysteria. "My name is Anton Cord, please, it is, my name is Anton Cord."

It took him a long time to fall asleep again. And when he did, the dream was waiting.

slouched forward against the bar, midway down the fully occupied line of stools. He lit a cigarette and with difficulty placed it on the rim of the ashtray in front of him; it seemed perversely determined to slip either to the smooth wood of the counter, or else among the crumpled butts in the tray. Cord was very drunk.

The Cold Spoor Club was studiously old-fashioned, but not to the point of ostentation. Modeled on the lines of bars of the early twentieth century, it retained character yet was still smooth and functional. Chromed furniture complemented the many mounted trophies; great heads shaggy or slick with simulated mucus, reptilianly scaled or dusted with fine powder against a predator's grasping tentacles. The atmosphere was exciting and at the same time comfortable; the club took its personality from the patrons, who for the most part were colonists and adventurers—people who did not insist on strict respectability, and yet who were intelligent enough not to need an atmosphere of artificial depravity or hectic vice, both common on the more "civilized" planets.

Behind the long wood-and-chrome bar there was a darkly tinted mirror, punctuated by

"I'LL HAVE another drink, Harry. The same." Cord

intermittent shelves of liquor bottles. Along the opposite wall stood a line of booths, broken in the middle by a door leading to the other rooms, a dining room with scattered tables, a dance-floor, and a small stage. Later in the evening a half-breed, not-quite-human girl would sing, bathed in a spotlight that pulsed in time to her slow deep voice, dark ballads the listeners always recognized, somewhere inside them, even though they'd never heard them before.

Harry, the bartender, filled Cord's glass and watched disapprovingly as it was drained. He looked up and down the bar, and seeing no customers calling him, leaned closer to Cord.

"Cord, can I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead," Cord said disinterestedly. The liquor no longer had much effect other than to burn pleasantly going down; he fancied that it vaporized within him and seeped through his skin. He could smell the warm, heady fumes plainly.

"Look, Cord; why don't you see a psyker?" The bartender was prompted by genuine concern, but the fact didn't penetrate to Cord. Instant revulsion swept through him, a

blind nausea like that of an acrophobe who suddenly finds himself looking down from a great height. Cord glared at Harry with a mixture of anger and self-pity at being betrayed by someone in whom he had placed trust.

"Harry," he said slowly, thickly, "Harry, I thought you were my friend."

"Cord, I *am* your friend." The bartender had known far too many drunks; he did not follow the impulse to raise his eyes exasperatedly heavenwards. "Look. I've been your friend ever since you landed on this planet a year ago. Steered you to that job at the gunsmith's. I introduced you around, got you in with the guys. We've gone hunting together quite a few times, and had fun. Right?" He looked at Cord until the other grudgingly assented.

"So all right; we're friends. And now you suddenly start drinking like a fish, and when I ask you what's wrong, you give with a mixed-up mess about how you have bad dreams, and how you saw a girl who reminded you of a girl you never knew, and how you keep remembering a lot of things about people you say you've never even met." Harry was a tall, muscular man with a thick head of mousy hair,

and now he ran a hand back through it in a gesture of puzzlement.

"If you weren't my friend, I wouldn't give a damn. But the way it is, you got something wrong with you, and all I can do is tell you to see a psycher. I have to tell you that, if only because I'm your friend."

Cord shook his head in drunken stubbornness. "You are wrong, Harry. If you were my friend, you wouldn't tell me to see a psycher."

"For God's sake, Cord, what's so bad about going to a psycher? Everybody does it at one time or another. I just don't get it!"

"I can't stand them, that's all. I just can't stand them." Drunk, Cord could find no better verbalization of his revulsion, of the horrified disgust the word "psycher" evoked in him. His thoughts churned with loathing at the idea of being probed, questioned, analyzed, even *hypnotized*. The last was the most horrible; to lie there helpless and responsive and ductile, completely obedient to the slightest whim of a "doctor" who might at any moment choose to play God—to order Cord to do this or think that or feel something else. . . . Cord mentally twisted and

writhed at the thought of being hypnotized, writhed and shuddered and shouted a cerebral "No!" the way some people do at the thought of death.

"I just can't stand them," he repeated for the third time.

"What kind of talk is that? Look . . ." Someone down the bar was tapping a glass against the wood, calling for the bartender. Harry nodded his willingness to serve, raised a hand that meant, "just a minute," and turned back to Cord.

"Cord, listen; things are going to be jumping tonight, and we probably won't get another chance to talk. So get this now; if you're going to get drunk, get drunk here. Stick around until closing and I'll take you home and see that you're okay. Hell, I want to talk to you; you've got some pretty wrong ideas. If you pass out before closing, or feel like you're going to, use the cot in the office.

"You understand me? Get drunk if you must, but stay here."

"All right, Harry." A glow of warmth spread through Cord's being; he had a friend, someone who would take care of him, see that he came to no harm. "All right, Harry," he said again, and offered the man his hand.

"You nut, Cord," Harry said with rueful affection. He squeezed Cord's hand and hurried off down the bar. Cord watched him go with mixed feelings; part of him wanted to get away, to run, to leave the place because Harry was suspect, had suggested Cord embrace horror and see a psycher. Over-riding this was the knowledge that Harry was a nice guy, who had only said what just about anyone would have, under the circumstances.

But what would he do—Cord wondered—if he knew what was happening?

I'm not crazy, Cord thought, but I will be, pretty soon.

FIRST the dreams, and then the girl. He'd been walking to work one morning, and at an intersection of two thronged, busy streets, the girl had walked past. Cord had noticed her—as had every man within half a block—first because of her walk, a woman's answer to a strong man's swagger. Then the eye traveled up the precise, incredibly graceful curves of her legs, up to the nipped-in slimness of her waist, and finally—expecting all the time to be disappointed because so much beauty just couldn't possibly continue

without some fault—up past her breasts to the chiseled, confident calm of a perfect face topped by jet-black hair.

Beautiful, self-assured women were no rarity on the frontier planets, of course. Anyone with a personality of any strength at all made every effort to get away from the sickly stasis of the "civilized" worlds. And beauty and talent were two eminently saleable articles; the possession of either was flat assurance of a space-ticket to any place you cared to go. And this girl was not only beautiful, but intelligent; the triple-cross insignia on her brooch marked her as a multilingual comptroller—a job calling for an I.Q. in excess of 150.

Hell, Cord had thought delightedly, as he turned his head to follow the girl's progress—becoming as he did so a unit in a sea of men's heads swaying toward the girl—hell, wait until I tell Tabatha I've found her dead-ringer!

It had been only later, in the store, that he'd realized sickeningly he'd never in all his life known anyone even remotely resembling the girl, and had furthermore never known a girl named "Tabatha."

But ever since that day, the dream had changed slightly, in that one of the advancing shadows always became visible. A great white cat as sleek and smoothly deadly as any panther, wearing a red silk bow on which was embroidered—and by some trick of the dream easily read—"Tabby."

Cord shook his head groggily to dispel the memory. His full glass caught his attention, and he drained it with a smooth, practiced motion, the one physical task his drunkenness never affected. Trying to sense whether the drink had any effect, he became suddenly aware that the other drinks had caught up with him. His lips and extremities felt tingling and numb, and there was a persistent buzzing in his ears. In a little while, he knew, the buzzing would become louder, would acquire form and rhythm. A hollow nasal roaring, *wangada, wangada, wangada, wangada*, that would grow louder and ever louder until he passed out.

He shook his head again, his brain feeling like a lump of ice in a glass of water; rotate the glass and the ice floating within it remains stationary. *First the dream*, he thought, *and then the girl, and then . . .*

And then the memories that aren't mine.

The first—in the order in which they'd come to him—was by far the nicest. In it he lay on a soft, low bed, in a room illuminated by a faint reddish light that spilled from a wide window. Because of the light's color, he thought it might be evening or early morning, but he was not sure which. In the memory, he lay quietly watching Tabatha as she stood nude at the window, one slim languid hand holding a gray curtain out of the way. With the soft glowing light on her, she was so beautiful, so perfect, that tears welled up in his eyes. He couldn't say anything, couldn't trust himself to speak. After a long while, and without taking her eyes from whatever she was watching outside, she said quietly, like slow faint bells, "There are never any clouds here." He answered with something indistinguishable, something that made her chuckle lightly and walk cat-like and beautiful to the bed.

I have never been on a cloudless planet, Cord thought.

The second memory was as brief as the first. He stood on a slightly raised platform in front of a level expanse of lawn, an automatic scattergun—toylike and ineffectual—at the ready in his hands.

"Pull!" he said, and instantly, several white things were hurled into the air—was it fifty yards away? Then the gun kicked against his shoulder, his trigger-finger working so incredibly fast that the recoils became nothing but a burst of vibration, and, impossibly, there was nothing left in the air where the targets had been but a drifting cloud of fine white dust. Then Saul clapped him on the shoulder and said, "Wonderful shooting, boy!" That was the end of the episode, except that in it he knew, somehow, that Saul was his best friend—when he'd never had a friend called Saul—and when he tried to remember Saul's face, to concentrate on the details, there was nothing but an indistinct blur.

Cord looked down at his empty glass; it seemed to tremble in time to the roaring in his ears. Somehow, the enigma of *who* Tabatha and Saul were was not as important as *why*. Why did he have memories that were patently false, remembrance of incidents that couldn't have occurred? And why did the first two memories—detailed and complete as they were—appear so innocuous and unfrightening, compared to the third and most tenuous one?

The third—and last—memory was without location; there was nothing but unformed chaos and the feeling of being enclosed in a too-small room. Quite abruptly, as if his words had been chopped off from a preceding conversation—and a terrible, revelatory one, at that—Saul spoke.

"Can't compete with you, Dom. There's . . ."

Every time since the memory had first appeared, Cord did the identical thing after that sentence. Simultaneous with the sound of the name "Dom," Cord's mind flinched violently while his lips curled in the expression that precedes a spasm of vomiting. Shame, disgust and fear drowned out the hated name, pushing it under, concealing it while Cord trembled and fought an urge to scream.

Cord stood up suddenly, beckoning to the bartender. Harry's face seemed to swim over to him, suspended in colorless mist, while the nasal, insane roaring in his ears gained more and more volume, threatened to become his entire world. As if underwater, Cord heavily indicated his empty glass, unable to speak. Harry almost objected, took one look at Cord's face, and filled the glass without a word. Cord reached out and

lifted the glass, seeing nothing but it, so that it rose to his lips as if teleported, the solitary bright living spot in an enormous black cavern that echoed and re-echoed with the roaring that precedes death and anesthesia. Cord opened his mouth to drink, not hearing or feeling the click of his lower teeth meeting the rim of the glass. Opened his mouth to drink, and . . .

A few feet away, Dom Hagar looked at Cord, holding a glass that seemed to invite Cord to join him in a toast.

Cord screamed and hurled his glass and, still screaming and with his teeth bared crazily in a snarl, was halfway across the bar before his glass had shattered in the mirror, shattered and obliterated with a cobwebbed star his reflection as it advanced to meet him.

And then Harry expertly and compassionately chopped at the back of Cord's neck with the edge of his hand, and—for Cord—the universe became an immense emptiness where not even the roaring lingered.

AFTER an effortless time, which might have lasted for seconds or millennia, there was feeling and with it awareness

—of a sort. Once, as a child, he had seen a picture of a device used by pre-atomic scientists to handle "hot" materials, in those incredible days when the mass-to-energy reaction had been allowed to create and radiate non-beneficial byproducts.

The picture had been of a pair of massive gloves, gloves that contained relays that activated—at the end of long, gleaming steel robotic arms—a pair of clumsy and inefficient but remarkably mobile graspers. Between the operator and his work was a concrete-and-lead wall, and he viewed what he was doing through an ingenious system of mirrors.

Now—how he knew it he could not understand; it was enough to know it—he was the graspers and somewhere someone was operating him, peering into his brain and through his eyes, making experimental moves that had no significance until someone said (*said?*), "Now, try it."

The sensation was that of a gentle and reassuring push.

Abruptly, he had identity—though a strange and contradictory one—but before he could say "I am I" there was a door in front of him, and before he could ask "Where am I?" he said clearly and aloud,

"Man overboard!" because the door-lock was set to open only to that combination of sounds.

"Good midnight, Dom," said Saul, as the door opened.

Instantly he wanted to vanish, to disintegrate, or if that were impossible, then to scrape the name and voice from his mind like a slime and fling them away. But that was impossible, too, and he couldn't die because of the soothing hands holding him down on a bed while calm voices assured him that everything was all right. There wasn't anything to do but go on with it, and once he accepted that along with the realization that nothing had hurt him, he felt better; though it was a bit of a shock to find he had already walked across the small, book-filled room to where Saul had risen from his chair, and was shaking hands.

"Good midnight, Saul," he said.

That was when he learned that not only could nothing hurt him, but it also didn't matter what he felt or thought. He felt like asking what was going on, but, exactly as in an all-sense movie, the action continued without his volition. By the time he realized it, he'd taken off his tunic and was sitting in a chair, facing Saul, who was obviously waiting for

him to get comfortable before starting conversation.

There was a pause like a throat-clearing, and then Saul said, "I called you over, Dom, because there's something I have to tell you."

This time, he didn't even flinch at the name, and as Dom, he had nothing to say, and so nodded to show his attention. As Dom, he knew before Saul said anything that it would be a bomb; they'd known each other too long, too well, for surprises.

"Dom," Saul said heavily, but rushing through the words, "I'm in love with Tabatha."

As a shock, it was considerable. He was genuinely perplexed, and made more so by the fact that, as Dom, the emotion he felt, after the initial adrenalic surge, was . . . pity.

"So am I," he said.

"I know. My God, I know. Cigarette?" Content now to sit back and watch the play, he remarked the trembling of Saul's hand offering the box, noticed that his own was surprisingly steady as it accepted a cigarette. He lit it and waited for Saul to do the same before speaking.

"And Tabatha loves me," he said. And then, groping for words, "Saul, look. Tabatha and I are . . . cohabiting."

There was a pause. "I see," Saul said. "That makes it harder."

"I don't understand."

As a spectator, he noticed something that the original Dom had not. That he'd taken three drags on the cigarette, and that Saul had been counting them. At that instant, Saul's voice changed, changed and acquired menace.

"Dom, I love Tabatha; I want her. I *will* have her." There was a very short, calculated hesitation, then. "One thing I know; I can't compete with you, Dom. There's nothing for it, then, but this. You've got to go."

"You're crazy!" Dom said it, and he thought it; and someplace far away—wherever his controller was—someone said, "A paranoid!" The accents held utter stupefaction, and the voice followed with, "How the hell did we ever miss him?"

"No, Dom," said Saul. "Only very clever. And I mean what I say."

"If I thought you were joking, I'd . . . don't you realize that you can't . . ." But he never finished the sentence; Saul's menacing, level voice cut in.

"No, Dom . . . *you* can't. You can't get up from that chair, for one thing. For another,

you can't hear anything but my voice. . . ."

And it was true; he might as well have been glued to the chair, might as well have been wearing closed-system radio earphones with Saul on the other end. Before the smooth voice told him he couldn't speak, he had time to say, numbly, "It was the cigarette!" and hear Saul answer, "It was the cigarette." Then everything was whirling and submerged and he was shooting upwards toward consciousness faster and faster and then there was a splintering inward crash like an enormous kaleidoscope and suddenly he was sitting upright in a hospital bed, surrounded by three psychers, the youngest of whom repeated,

"It was the cigarette!"

And Dom Hagar, who had thought himself—who had actually been—Anton Cord, nodded his head slowly and tiredly and then said, addressing them all,

"It's all right now; I remember everything. Everything."

ONCE YOU KNEW what Saul was, it became perfectly easy to understand why he had not bothered to move, had not changed planets, had not even changed his personal living-

quarters. Dom, who had been Cord, stood before the door once again, and behind him the two calm men, one from Psych-Bur and the other from Social Protection, waited silently and emotionlessly for whatever would come.

"Man overboard," said Dom, and the door opened.

An ordinary person—"normal" is not the word; it reeks too much of statistical generality—whether he knows it or not, bases his life on the premise, "I am I, and more important to myself than to other men." A paranoid of Saul's type, driven into any cul-de-sac, placed under any strain unresolvable by superficial "normal" actions, reacts as if his life's keystone is, "I am I, and most important; there are no other men." From this, it is an effortless, warped small step to, "I am infallible."

Saul had been a brilliant psyker, excellent at his trade. His natural intelligence and his rich family had conspired to give him a world in which he was never blocked, never frustrated. As long as that world held up, he was "normal," was a "nice guy," was—among other things—Dom's best friend. So, Saul loved Tabatha and Tabatha loved Dom. Ergo: Dom was an obstacle, and as such, something to get

rid of and to forget. Having been disposed of, Dom became to Saul so unimportant as to be non-existent.

The door opened, interrupting a scene that could not have been a pleasant one. Tabatha stood at the end of the room, facing the door over Saul's shoulder. Alone with him, her face had been expressing bewildered humiliation; now, as Dom stepped through the doorway, it changed, became a beacon of incredulous wonder.

Saul, his back to the door, was resting one hip on the arm of a chair, a relaxed, dominating pose. Without looking behind him, he said, in the tone one uses to someone interrupting a family quarrel, "Get out of here."

"Saul—" said Dom. Saul's body went rigid, and his head snapped around.

His face was not pretty. In it, sanity was as tight and vulnerable as an inflated rubber balloon approached by a needle. The needle was Dom, Dom who should have been gone, who was gone; who should not have come back, who *could not* come back. For a flicker of an instant Saul's face was totally blank with the realization that not even he could make something non-existent by wishing it so. But that was as sane as he was; if

he could not wish Dom out of existence, he could at least try to do something, invalidate him, cancel him out. Accordingly, Saul's expression changed again—all so quickly that this last face might have been the one he turned around with—changed again and became scornful, contemptuous. The strong, righteous man facing the weak, indecisive coward.

"So, you've come back—dared to come back, after the way you left. Do you realize what we've gone through?" But it was no use, was less than no use. Something in the atmosphere refused to lend support to the lie, so that the lightning-fast, psychologically perfect accusation snapped out of the air without an echo, leaving them all with the impression that he'd babbled incoherently.

"It's no use, Saul," said Dom, and his words held pity.

But Saul didn't appear to hear Dom; instead looked past or through him, spoke to the man beyond as if Dom didn't exist.

"You there—I can see your brooch; you're from Psych-Bur, right? Then you've noticed this man is a schizoid; take him away and put him under therapy at once." Then, when the man made no move, "What's the matter with you?

Get him down to the hospital and I'll phone in an okay. There won't be any trouble; I've got First Class general expert status."

"I am an executive troubleshooter," said the man from Psych-Bur, in the disinterested voice of a scientist describing an uninteresting compound having an unspectacular reaction.

Dom said, "I told you, Saul. It's no use—"

Howling, Saul sprang at Dom's throat.

The small, gray man from Social Protection stepped quickly between them. He seemed to accept Saul into an embrace, seemed to be carried back by Saul's weight with one foot reaching behind him in an action as inhuman and mechanical as the balancing of a tight-rope walker, seemed to stagger a little and bend a little more, and then they were on the floor with Saul underneath, pinned and powerless, unable to move but able to shriek curses and obscenities until the man from Psych-Bur bent over him and pressed something like a pocket flashlight to Saul's upper arm.

There was the sharp *thump!* of a subcutaneous injection administered by a needle-less compressed-air hypo, and Saul was silent.

AND THEN—after the man from Psych-Bur had spoken into a pocket-radio, calling an ambulance crew who quickly arrived and removed Saul's unconscious body; after the gray little man from Social Protection had mumbled a few words into a mini-recorder and left—the man from Psych-Bur had looked at them, at Dom and Tabatha, with eyes that had seemed to give them everything from a pulse-count to an electroencephalogram to a Rorschach test, and said, "You'll be all right, I believe." He left, and they were alone.

For a long moment they stood tentatively motionless, letting their mutual presence re-engage the separated gears of their two personalities. Without appearing to have crossed the room, Tabatha was suddenly in Dom's arms, the contact so urgent as to be almost violent; her arms about him pulling her face hard against his chest.

"He said . . . he said you thought I was trying to trap you into marrying me. That you only pretended to love me so I'd cohabit with you. He said you went away. . . ." Tabatha wept like a child; noisily, her shoulders heaving.

"It wasn't true," said Dom. "He drugged and hypnotized

me, pushed my personality under and slammed the lid on it; built me a new personality . . . a man named Anton Cord. He told me to go away, to forget."

"You came back."

"I came back. He tried too hard, you see. He knew his work couldn't possibly stand up to a psyching, so he made me fear and hate psychers, avoid them at all costs. He must have known I'd begin to remember things, sooner or later. He made my true name a thing of horror and disgust to me, too, so that if I began to remember it, I wouldn't want to."

Tabatha was quite still in his arms, holding him tightly, listening.

"It was too much; the false personality broke down . . . painfully. Too many commands, too many fears. Anton Cord threw a screaming fit in a bar on Henderson's Planet . . . where he'd gone in obedience to Saul's commands, out near the galaxy's unexplored End.

"The bartender was an intelligent man. He knocked Cord—me—out, and called the psychers. And that was that."

She clung to him, not speaking, looking blankly at and through a wall, for a long time.

"What will we do now?" she said.

He understood. It was her way of saying, *I have been with Saul because I thought you left me; if you had not left me, I would not have done it. Now you are back and I want you still, as I have always wanted you.* And leaving him free; leaving it all to him to decide.

He thought of saying, *I never left you; the time I spent away from you was not my time; Anton Cord was not me.* But that would not do; it

was not basic enough. He thought of saying, *I love you.* But he knew she would know that without its being said.

She was motionless against him, and he knew she was waiting.

And suddenly he remembered the last words of the man from Psych-Bur, the voice level, emotionlessly calm, eternally and unshakably sure of itself.

"Don't worry," Dom said, his lips against her hair. "Don't worry; everything's going to be all right."



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HELEN STEIN, Secretary

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 10th day of September, 1957.

WILLIAM D. LIDDLE

Notary Public, State of New York. No. 41-2353859. Qualified in Queens County. Term expires March 20, 1959.



THE FAN-SPACE

Conducted by Archibald Destiny

ONE of these days, there's going to be a showdown between Shaw and me. So far, it's been an armed truce. Last issue, he managed to squeeze me out again. This issue, I've shoved *him* out by brute force. And in the future, I'm going to insist on having at least three pages in every issue. If LTS won't give me space, I'll do something drastic—like not giving him my column!

●

I HAD a complaint from someone—I honestly forget who—to the effect that this department isn't really for fans, but for the readers who don't know much about fandom yet. Which is perfectly true. The thing is designed that way for very sound reasons—and I'm sorry if it makes anyone unhappy, but. . . .

As you may know, it takes several weeks to print a maga-

zine and get it to the newsstands. Even though I'm writing this at the last possible moment, you won't read it for well over a month. So I can't do anything about giving you hot news of fandom; anything I write will cool off before it reaches you. And in any case, if you're a fan already, chances are you know as much about fandom as I do.

What can I do to make this department worth printing, then? Simple—I can do my best to get readers interested in fandom, so they'll subscribe to fanzines, join clubs, and take part in other fannish activities. Fandom is in constant need of new recruits; helping find those recruits is the best thing I can do for it. Okay?

Of course, if you're a fan and have any news or information you think should be brought to the attention of the general reading public, I'll

try to squeeze it in even if it doesn't fall under the "recruitment" heading. This is a service department, and I stand ready to serve to the best of my ability. Tennis, anyone?

●

FANS AND READERS who would like to read a report on the Fifteenth World Science Fiction Convention, which took place in London early in September, can find one in the current issue of *Infinity*. It's written by your friend and mine Robert Silverberg (Bob and his pretty wife flew to England for the affair and to see the country), and covers the con highlights very nicely. I didn't make it, myself; I stood on the dock waving a thumb, but no ship would give me a free ride.

One big event at every convention is the choice of the site for the following year's ditto. This year, the vote was unanimous—possibly because only one city put in a bid. So it's Los Angeles in 1958. And thereby hangs a tradition.

Many years ago—more than ten, which is "many" by fan-nish standards—a new fan named Rick Sneary appeared. He rapidly became famous, partly for his fantastic misspellings but more for his

excellent sense of humor and dynamic activity on numerous projects. Rick lived, and lives, in a section of Los Angeles known as South Gate, and when other fans touted their towns as possible convention sites, Rick set up a cry of "South Gate in '58!"

It began as a joke, and became one of those bits of esoterica that are repeated so often in the fanzines that the sources are all but forgotten. But as 1958 came closer, a lot of people became serious about it. For the past two years at least, a hard core of West coasters and sympathizers in various parts of the country have been working to make the tradition come true.

Unfortunately, there's no hotel in South Gate itself large enough (or solidly built enough) to hold a fan convention. But the con *will* be in L.A., as close as possible to S.G., and in spirit at least it will definitely be a South Gate clambake.

●

I DON'T HAVE the official address of the convention committee yet, but if you want to get on the mailing list immediately, you can undoubtedly do so by dropping a card to Len Moffatt, 5969 Lanto Street, Bell Gardens, Califor-

nia. Better yet, drop 25¢ or more in an envelope and send it to Len. In return, you'll receive a copy of a handsome and fascinating publication entitled *The Selected Writings of Rick Sneary*, and you'll be contributing to the "WAW to the Gate in '58" fund.

"WAW" is Walter A. Willis, an Irish fan. I couldn't possibly describe Willis adequately in three pages, so I will say only that he is probably the most famous and best-liked fan of all time. He has written hundreds of side-splittingly funny articles and columns for fanzines, has published an excellent fanzine of his own, and has contributed wisely and constructively to countless fan projects. And he has stood by the "South Gate in '58" guns so long and faithfully that Sneary and Moffatt (among many others) feel that the convention won't be complete unless he is there.

Walt has attended one convention in the United States: Chicago, 1952. And because fans chipped in to help pay his passage then, Walt feels very strongly that he should not accept help to get here this time. He also believes that the WAW fund might interfere with TAFF—the Trans-Atlantic Fan Fund, another worthy idea I'll discuss in a

future column. But WAW's friends want him so badly that they hope to snow him under with sheer enthusiasm—and it's a show of enthusiasm as much as a show of crinkly and jingly stuff that they're asking for.

Personally, I think it's a great idea. WAW is one man I want to meet, and a man who would add a great deal to the luster of any convention. So send Len a quarter; the *Selected Writings* are worth it in any event, and you'll go a long way to find a better cause, in fandom or out of it.

●

I'LL PRINT further details on the convention as soon as I receive them, of course. Meanwhile, I want to go on record as saying that from here and now, it looks like it's going to be the best ever. And by "best," in this case, I mean "most fannish."

●

NEXT TIME, I'll catch up with all the personals you want printed. So let me hear from you at Royal Publications, Inc., 11 West 42nd Street, New York 36, New York, especially if you have items for publication. Down with Shaw, and see you next time!

The Girl Was DANGEROUS

by **WALTER L. KLEINE**

*She told crazy lies about herself, but her strength
was inhuman and her way of using it even more so!*

Illustrated by Richard Kluga

THE GIRL with the funny accent sat on the edge of the bed and grinned up at Krojac. Flesh was beginning to swell around the ropes that bound her wrists and ankles. Her cheeks were raw and swollen, and two angry red welts ran across her back, plainly visible through her thin blouse.

Krojac let the belt buckle swing back and forth before her eyes. On the table behind him, the wide-handled knife he'd taken from the sheath taped to her thigh lay beside the pile of junk he'd dumped out of her battered purse.

"Okay, honey," he said quietly, "let's have it straight this time. Then we can all go home."

"Home? What's that?" she said, and Krojac felt the frustration of a man forced to listen to a cracked record playing the same groove over and over again. "I'm doing for the Brotherhood of Arcturus Area Planets an investigation to see if this planet can be admitted to the Brotherhood without extensive preparation. We recently have had to expand our operations, and much more territory for this is needed. It is better that we expand first to planets which do not need work done. I have reported that this one doesn't, and I am now waiting. I have been here four months, one week, three days, and," she twisted her head so she could

see the clock behind Krojac, "and thirteen hours and twenty-seven minutes. Unless someone else has turned in a report unfavorably, the boys should be here soon."

She clammed up and sat there grinning at him. It was the sixth time she'd told him the same insane story—or was it the seventh or eighth?—and she hadn't changed a word except about the time she'd been here.

Krojac suppressed an urge to beat a hole in the wall with her head and said quietly: "Why did you follow us out here tonight?"

"I didn't," she said, "I've been living here. If I had known that tonight you would be using it, I would not have come. I made a mistake badly."

Krojac forced down his anger and felt his stomach knot up. He was a Big Man in the Syndicate. Not top, or near it, but still a Big Man, not just a well-dressed goon like the two "protection" boys he'd brought along on this job. The Syndicate placed a high value on his ability to make people cooperate without making them mad, and paid him plenty to keep his nose clean and be available.

That was what the job had been tonight. A small-time bookie was trying to operate

outside the Syndicate, and didn't join when asked politely. A few hours ago they'd "borrowed" his daughter and brought her out to the old farmhouse in the middle of nowhere that they used for this sort of thing. They treated her right, and after they let her talk to her old man for a few minutes, he said sure, he'd sign up. As soon as they got a call confirming his promise, they'd take the kid back to him.

Fine; simple; no trouble at all. *Except that this grinning witch had to follow them all the way out from town!*

There was nothing on her or in her car that told them anything about her or why she followed them. And when he tried to get anything out of her—

HE WASN'T paying much attention to the protection boys behind him, and less to the book's kid, but he could feel their eyes boring into his back. The kid had never seen anything like this. The boys had heard, correctly, that he'd never taken over fifteen minutes to get cooperation from a woman.

He'd lost track of the time he'd spent on this one—half an hour, forty-five minutes?

He couldn't have much left; the call confirming the book's acceptance was due any minute. If he didn't get cooperation from the witch by then, he would have to admit his failure, and ask for instructions. That wouldn't do either his reputation or his bankroll any good. The Syndicate could not permit failure.

He forced himself to relax. She had a weak spot. Everybody had weak spots. Hers was just not one of the usual ones. He had to find it.

"You don't look dumb enough to expect anybody to believe that," he said in a soft monotone. "Do you really want me to give you the works, or are you going to give me some cooperation?"

She grinned. "If I had longer been here, I might be able to tell a lie you would believe. But I wouldn't if I could. I very much would like to know what you consider 'the works' to be."

As he stepped forward, Krojac heard one of the protection boys say: "Gees! She asked for it . . ."

Radnic Krojac knew how to use a belt. Her back was hamburger in thirty seconds.

Her grin had twisted slightly when she looked up. "Not bad," she said, "considering. But I should perhaps tell you

that on my born planet there is three and one-half times the gravity of this one. Your technique I admire, but you have not much really hurt me."

Krojac's shell of perfect self-control cracked for a fraction of a second and the belt flicked at her face. Blood dribbled down her cheek.

It was an accident, but it found her weak spot.

Her body jerked tense and the grin vanished as if turned off by a switch. "I wouldn't do that if I were you!" Her voice was a whispered snarl.

Relaxation swept over Krojac like a tidal wave. He grinned. "You're in a position to stop me?"

"I am. I will not let you make me afford plastic surgery on my face. I do not mind the back, but faces cost too much."

Krojac reached behind him and picked up her knife. He forced the grin off his face and his voice returned to its normal monotone. "Let's have a straight story this time. I won't enjoy carving you up any more than you'll enjoy your plastic surgery bill, but I promise you I can fix it so no surgeon in the world can make your face anything you'd want to see look back out of a mirror. I'm not going to ask you again. Let's have it."

He pointed the knife at the

tip of her nose and moved it slowly toward her.

"Don't do it, Krojac," she said rapidly, "don't do it for God's sake if you believe in God or your goons' sake if you don't—I don't want to kill anybody—" Abruptly she rolled back on the bed, threw her hands in front of her face and pulled her legs up tight against her body.

He stepped out of line with her legs; bent to pull her hands away from her face.

A spring exploded beneath him.

Radnic Krojac knew every judo hold in the book, and a lot that weren't put in books, but he didn't have a chance. Her fingers closed on his knife hand like steel claws, and her feet found his stomach, in spite of his precautions, and lifted him as easily as if he had been made of tissue paper. He hit the wall and felt it give. His head and shoulders dropped into the narrow space between the bed and the wall.

The sound of shots came through his daze. There were two brilliant flares of light, and the shots stopped. A woman's scream mingled with a woman's laughter. The sound of running feet cut off abruptly as the door slammed. Outside a car snarled and sprayed the house with gravel.

Krojac grabbed at the side of the bed and missed. He got it the second time and pulled himself clear. He staggered blindly across the room and grabbed the 'scope-sighted rifle off the wall.

His head had cleared a little by the time he got to the window, but it didn't do any good. She wasn't using lights and there was no moon. He could still hear her—she had taken one of the Syndicate's best "business" cars, an ancient Chevy with a souped truck engine that made it first cousin to an airplane—but the sound of the screaming motor was almost as bad as no target at all. He emptied the rifle in the general direction of the sound. It didn't stop.

He dropped the useless weapon and asked himself how it could have happened.

The only answer was that it couldn't have.

It had.

What if she had been telling the truth? No. He caught himself and swore briefly. He'd get nowhere on *that* angle. Things like that just didn't happen. There was a gimmick in the deal somewhere.

And how far did she think she was going in a Syndicate car, anyway? One call to the Boss and— He took two steps



toward the phone and stopped dead.

Tell *this* to the Boss?

Krojac knew that some men made a living sticking their heads into lions' mouths. He couldn't see it. If he could find the gimmick he'd be clear. The Boss would forgive almost anything to know how to pull off a stunt like that.

He took a good look at the room for the first time since she made her break.

It looked like a tank had been driven through it.

The two protection boys were flat on their backs with blood all over their chests. The bed, two tables, and three chairs were overturned. The book's girl was gone. Short bits of rope were scattered near the bed. Her knife was not in sight.

It began to make a little sense. She might have twisted his hand so that the knife cut her hands free. The knife handle was big enough to hold two short .22 barrels, and she'd had surprise in her favor. After she got the boys, she'd have had plenty of time to cut the ropes on her feet and get out before he could disentangle himself from the bed. The odds were against her being able to get away with it, but this time the dice had happened to fall right for her.

The Boss just might accept this.

Something about those pieces of rope bothered him. He walked over and picked one up, and his theory fell apart.

The rope had not been cut. Both ends were badly frayed. It had been *broken*!

"No!" he said, aloud.

The phone rang.

KROJAC made a snap decision. If he didn't answer it, and just ran, he might last one month or six, but not much longer. The Boss didn't know that the ropes were broken. If the frayed ends were cut off, the Boss just might accept his story. He practically dived at the phone.

"Rad? This is Eddie—"

"Get me the Boss, Eddie. This one blew up."

"But—"

"Don't 'but' me; get me the Boss! I said this deal blew!"

The line clicked, buzzed, clicked again. "Krojac?" The Boss's voice would have taken the paper off the walls. Krojac saw his chances dwindling. He must have caught the Boss in the middle of Something Big.

"Boss, did Eddie tell you we caught a tail on the way out from town?"

"No. Did you? What was he? State?"

"I don't know. He was a she. We snagged her on the lane out to the farm. She was about thirty seconds behind us. She—"

"Krojac, you called me at a time like this for a thing like that?"

"No! She killed Mike and Dom and got away with the book's kid and *our car!*"

There was a brief silence. Then the Boss said, very quietly, "This is serious. Which car were you driving?"

"The black Chev—4431."

Krojac could hear the Boss talking to someone else in the room, but the words were indistinguishable. Then: "How did it happen? Give me the important details and then get in here as quick as you can. We've got a bigger blow-up than yours on our hands here; we need you."

Krojac told him, with a few and as favorable details as possible.

The Boss grunted. "You said she had a crazy story about being from another planet. Did she say anything about the Brotherhood of Arc-turus Area Planets?"

"Yes; how—"

"I thought so. Lock that place up tight and get in here. I'll send somebody out to

clean up the mess when I get a chance. And don't worry about it. You did this one right even if it did blow up." The phone clicked.

Krojac dropped it back on the hook, scooped up the .32 that Dom had dropped, flicked the lights off, and started running. He did not bother to lock the door behind him.

Radnic Krojac had no intention of following the Boss's instructions. He had not become a Big Man in the Syndicate by failing to put two and two together.

The only way the Boss could have known about the Brotherhood of Arcturus Area Planets was if there really was such a thing, and one of their ships had landed, or somebody else had run into one of their investigators. In either case, one thing was certain: the Brotherhood had to be a legit outfit.

If it planned on moving in on the Earth, it would not be happy about the Syndicate. If the Syndicate didn't bother them, they might not go out of their way to destroy it, but they wouldn't pass up a chance to do some damage if one came along. The girl would give them that chance. She'd probably taken the book's kid with her more for information than out of kindness.

The Boss wouldn't be Boss if he couldn't see that. The way he'd talked, something else as bad or worse might have happened.

What if some of the Brotherhood's agents had the specific job of discovering how many and what kind of syndicates were operating? That girl had acted as if she might have intended to get caught, just to see what he'd do with her.

A lot of things were possible, but they all came down to the same conclusion: the Boss wanted Krojac so he'd have somebody to throw to the wolves when they started howling.

Krojac knew that his chances of running and getting away with it were no better than they had been. If anything, they were worse. In a pinch like this the Syndicate might look even harder. But there was a slim chance that he might make it, and if he did get caught he was still no worse off than if he drove into town and let the Boss get him now.

He had one advantage: he would be driving her car, and nobody in the Syndicate knew what kind or what color it was, or what its license number was. If he played it right and drove around the city and

then south for sixty-seventy miles before he headed west, he stood a good chance of getting across the Mississippi River before morning, and before the Syndicate really got started looking for him.

They would expect him to either head north for Canada or south for Mexico, probably the latter because his money would last longer there. If he headed straight west, instead, he might be able to lose himself in some little—but not *too* little—western town for quite a while. Maybe until the Brotherhood of Arcturus Area Planets had time to put the Syndicate out of business. That was his chance, his one slim chance.

KROJAC missed the ashtray the first time, but found it the second, and stubbed out his half-finished cigarette. He stared up at the cracked ceiling and reached for the pack. It was empty. He crumpled it and threw it across the room, in the general direction of the wastebasket.

He swore unenthusiastically.

Only a week and a half and he was so tense and tight he felt as if he could be twanged like a violin string. Another few days and he'd have to

come out of this hole and start looking for a job—a job that couldn't give the Syndicate anything to trace him by, and a job that wouldn't call for any identification he couldn't produce. It wouldn't be easy, and it wouldn't pay much when he found it, but it would keep him going until the Syndicate either caught up with him or got taken apart in enough pieces to let him start cashing checks on his bank account back home.

He rolled off the bed and took three steps across the room and turned on the radio. A newscast was due. It might have something new.

The Brotherhood had landed, all right—he'd found that out from the radio in the girl's car—but so far they hadn't done a thing about the Syndicate. Or about any other syndicate.

The closest they'd come to it was an announcement that they would send advisers to any law enforcement agency or prison that requested it. It was the same thing they were doing for everything. Did you want help on guided missiles? Irrigation projects? Corporation finance? Polio research? Dressmaking? Petunia growing? Hairpin bending? It seemed as if all somebody had to do was name it and the

Brotherhood would offer to send advisers. If that wasn't enough, they'd offer to send people to their schools, travel expenses paid, and if there was enough demand they'd offer to set up branches of their schools at schools teaching similar courses on Earth.

They seemed to be very careful to avoid any reference to the price they were going to ask for it all.

Krojac knew that there would be a price. There always was. He wasn't worried about it. He wanted to know what the Brotherhood was going to do about the Syndicate.

The radio came to life in the middle of a commercial. The commercial driveled to a close and the news came on: "The Russian Premier, addressing a special session of the Presidium today, announced that in the future nominations for all political offices voted on by the people will be made through primary elections, instead of in party committees. A State Department expert, who declined the use of his name, said that this step, if carried out honestly, will have the effect of eventually converting the Soviet Union to a democracy. The Soviet constitution, he said, is actually a very democratic document, which has to date been ham-

strung by the complete control which the Communist Party has held over the selection of candidates for all offices. It is believed that pressure from the Brotherhood of Arcturus Area Planets was responsible for the move.

"In other action today, the Brotherhood approved two hundred and thirty-one requests for technical advisers, fifty-three requests for scholarships to their universities, and announced that it plans to set up a branch of the psychology department of one of its universities, to be named later, at an American school, to be decided upon after conference with the requesting authorities.

"In Paris today . . ."

After devoting almost ten minutes to things the Brotherhood had its fingers in, the announcer got around to local news.

It was the same sort of stuff Krojac had been hearing for the last ten days. The Brotherhood did this; the Brotherhood did that; the Brotherhood did something else; and the Brotherhood didn't do one thing about the Syndicate.

Krojac snapped the radio off and swore. *Why* didn't they do something? They had the information; they *must*

have it. They had that girl and the book's kid, at least. That would give them all they needed. *Why* didn't they use what they had? Were they waiting for somebody to request an adviser to tell them how to get rid of that specific syndicate?

He fumbled through his suitcase, found another pack of cigarettes. He lit one. It tasted awful. He stubbed it out. He needed a drink. He reached for the phone; stopped. The bar downstairs wouldn't be open yet. He swore again. He could call room service and get coffee. *Coffee!* The thought almost made him sick to his stomach. He'd guzzled enough coffee in the last ten days to float one of the Brotherhood's space battleships. He laughed shortly, without humor. That was a good one—float a spaceship!

He went down the hall to the bathroom and got a drink of water. It was almost as warm as the weather.

He went back to his room and sat on the bed and tried to relax.

He couldn't.

There was nothing to do. He'd read until he couldn't stand the sight of another page. He'd played solitaire until he couldn't stand the sight of the deck. He'd lis-

tened to the radio until he couldn't stand that.

He slipped the .32 out of his pocket and checked its action for perhaps the thousandth time. It was the only friend he had left, now. He hoped it would be a better friend to him than it had been to Dom. Poor Dom. He always took such good care of his guns. Krojac shrugged and dropped it back in his pocket.

If only *something* would happen to break up this deadly monotony—but thank God it hadn't. The only things that could happen out here were bad things.

There was a knock on the door.

THE .32 CAME OUT of his pocket almost before he reached for it. This *had* to be trouble. Nobody but the hotel people knew he was here, and they didn't know his real name, and they had no business up here at this time of day.

"Who's there?" he snapped. The .32 was steady on the door, at about belly-level. He had a sick feeling that it *couldn't* have happened so soon, but he was almost glad that *something* had happened.

There was no answer. He repeated the question.

The knob turned. The door moved inward a fraction of an inch before the inside bolt took hold.

"Who's there?" Krojac repeated. "I'll open it when you answer me."

Silence.

The door moved inward again, very slowly. The screws holding the bolt came out of the wood, almost soundlessly, it seemed.

Krojac stared.

The door opened and *she* stepped in. She closed the door behind her, gently. Her cheeks were smooth and clear, without a trace of a bruise, or of a scar. She was wearing a charcoal black business suit that looked like it had been poured onto her. She looked down at the gun in Krojac's hand. "I wouldn't do it, if I were you, Rad," she said. The corners of her lips tugged upward in a slight smile. "You'd have a hell of a time getting the blood off the carpet. And anyway, I took the precaution of being bullet-proof."

Krojac forced his voice to be normal. "Sit down," he said. "Take off your coat and stay a while, why don't you?" He stepped backward and leaned against the window ledge.

"Sure. Thanks." Her hands

moved up the front of her jacket in what seemed to be practically one continuous motion. She shrugged it off and tossed it onto the bed. There wasn't much under it. "I'm glad you suggested that," she said. "This planet has the warmest summer fashions I've run into since *Shedetch*." She lifted Krojac's suitcase off the room's only chair and sat down.

Krojac moved the gun up to cover her face. The Brotherhood might equip its people with flesh-colored bulletproof vests, but it would have a hard time doing the same above the neck. "I see you've gotten rid of your accent since we met," he said quietly. "Now let's see can you talk any better. For a start, how'd you find me? And why? I'm curious."

She said: "Put down the cannon, Rad. I came here to talk business, not admire the workmanship of your local artillery."

"Answer the questions and it won't go off."

She shrugged. "Well, you asked for it." Her left hand slapped at something in the air.

Something hit Krojac and jarred him to the bone. It was as if every joint in his body had been pulled apart and slammed back together. When

his head cleared, he saw the .32 lying on the floor in the center of the room.

He took one step toward it and her left hand snapped back. It was open now. It held something small and black. He stopped.

"Go ahead." She grinned wolfishly. "Go ahead; give me an excuse to do it again. The expression on your face was priceless."

Krojac stepped back.

She laughed with real humor. "I like this gimmick." She tossed it in the air and caught it. "I think it's much more effective than a belt, and," she laughed again, "it doesn't leave a mark."

She tossed it on the floor beside Krojac's .32. "Now maybe we can be friends. I said once already that I came here to talk business. You had some questions. About my accent—I never had one. I just fouled up some sentence structure so it would sound odd to you. I found you through some equipment I had on my car. You didn't know about it, so you didn't turn it off. I came after you because—"

"If you think you're going to make me rat on—"

SHE LAUGHED explosively. "Radnic, you have been listen-

ing to the propaganda on the radio. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but you've been believing it. And *you* should know better! Your Syndicate doesn't concern me in the slightest, unless it sticks its nose into my territory. And if it does that I still won't worry much, because somebody bigger than me will stomp them to a bloody pulp if they get out of line."

"But the Brotherhood—"

"The Brotherhood is a front! Not that it isn't a perfectly legit outfit—we're very careful about that. We're only a little part of a Galactic Federation, and the Federation has an equivalent of your FBI. It doesn't like us, but as long as we keep our front clean they can't touch us. We're the vacation spot of this end of the galaxy, and we're more than that. We're—well, take Las Vegas, Monte Carlo, and a few other similar spots, mix them up, and spread them over a few hundred thousand cubic light-years of space, and you've got the general idea.

"We operate, Rad; we operate big. But we operate big in little pieces, so if somebody goofs and the Feds stomp on him, we don't get hurt. There's thousands of—well, call them syndicates; it's as good a word as you've got—in the area of

the Brotherhood. There are big ones and little ones. Some of them cover half a planet; some of them cover a few square miles. But they all have one thing in common; they've got a good thing and they know it and they don't want to lose it. So they co-operate, and if somebody doesn't want to, he hasn't got a chance. Everybody else stomps all over him.

"Some syndicate or other has its fingers in every government in the Brotherhood—matter of fact, we made them form the Brotherhood, so we could work better and expand faster. You've seen how we're operating here—give them everything they ask for, and ask nothing in return. We don't have to ask for anything. It comes automatically. We get enough 'advisers' stuck in enough places, and people just naturally do what we want them to. No sweat; everybody's happy. It doesn't take long—four, five years maybe.

"The local syndicates get 'advisers' whether they want them or not, and they usually want them, because we've got a hell of a good deal for them. Where the syndicates don't cover, we send somebody in to fill up the gap. By the time anybody realizes what's happening we've ad-

vanced the planet so far and made so many people so happy that the people we make unhappy just don't count. We start bringing in tourists, and pretty soon the planet would go broke if they left. It's foolproof. If the Feds clean up a planet, it goes bust, and the minute they turn their backs people are begging us to come back.

"It's a good system, Rad. It's set up so it's foolproof and so it'll stay foolproof. The people that get to the top are smart ones and the tough ones. I'm smart and I'm tough—and don't you ever forget it.

"I started out in a house. That's the toughest place you can ask for, and I didn't ask for it. I went out with the wrong guy one night and got shanghied. Then somebody got me started on *jrudth* and didn't bother to tell me that the stuff will kill you in five years if you aren't addiction immune, and not more than one girl in a thousand is immune. I'm immune. The stuff deadens pain, and makes you about three times as strong as you should be. That's why it's popular in houses.

"Somebody in the exploration racket found out about me and bought my contract and gave me some training and started me out investigating

planets to see if their syndicates were big enough to be worth taking over. It's a rough job, but they pay pretty good money for it. Not enough so you can buy your contract back, of course, but good money. If you're smart—and I'm smart—you can pick up a pretty piece of change on the side. That kid I swiped from you guys brought a real pretty price.

"I could have bought my contract back a couple of years ago. I didn't—for which the Boss loved me dearly—because I wanted to make a pile and buy me a chunk of a good planet.

"This one is a *damn* good one, Rad. My old Boss sent one of his boys into your old Syndicate, and he saw to it that I got first shot at a nice chunk of uncovered territory about seventy miles or so southeast of there. He knows I'll do a good job, and set up good cooperation. It's a beautiful spot, Rad—three nice towns, lots of hills, and a river running right through the middle of it. Developed, it'll be worth a mint—a 'resort hotel' on the river, then another one . . ." She let her voice trail off, and grinned like a canary that had just swallowed the cat.

Krojac swallowed. "Good

deal, baby, but why tell it all to me? What have I done to rate this? Or do you just like to brag, or something?"

One corner of her mouth twisted up. "'Baby'—that's a good one; I like that. Well, Rad, it's this way. This job has to come from the inside out. It works like this. I put a bale of kale in your bank account—covered up right, of course. You use it to buy the land I want, and hire the architect I want. Then you ask the Brotherhood for an adviser on how to build and operate a resort hotel. They know I have that spot staked out; they send me. You know all the angles on this planet; I know all the angles in the Brotherhood. We work together and both get so rich we get stomach ulcers worrying about what to do with it all.

"That's the deal, Rad. You want it?"

She meant take it or get taken apart, and Krojac knew it. He said: "Sure, baby; I'd be a sap to pass up a deal like that. But I ask you; why me? Exactly what have I done to rate?"

She crossed the room and took his hand and shook it, and it felt like she was crushing every bone. "I said that we want smart guys and tough guys on top, Rad. You're smart enough, but you know, you're the meanest man I've met on a new planet in the last three years." She released his hand and took him in her arms and kissed him very thoroughly. She stepped back and grinned. "Radnic, I *like* you."

When Krojac could breathe again, he said: "Yeah, baby; I like you, too."



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THE READERS' SPACE

YOU'LL BE GLAD to know I'm a reformed man. For eons I have been a steady reader of those SF magazines whose records of peerless science fiction extend back to the beginnings of time itself (slight exaggeration). Trouble is those mags are getting more and more in a rut. So I went out hunting for a new publication to break the monotony. That's how I discovered SFA.

And I was truly (and pleasantly) surprised. I found none of the "sociological and psychological inter-relationship of non-functional particle-individuals"; instead I revelled in the purest form of science fiction—the free-and-easy adventure story with a fast-moving plot.

Now to comment on the October ish: Jorgenson's lead story was terrific and I enjoyed it immensely. "Earth Aflame" seemed a little roughly-constructed in places especially where Coulter purloins

the starship in front of everybody and in an impaired condition too. That short by Farrell was so good that I expect it to be featured in an anthology in the near future.

Keep up the good work!—
Tony Brookes, 2102 William Avenue, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.



The October SFA sported a beautiful cover, to say the least. This Waldman can *paint*. Although this particular scene or various similar variations of it has been used countless times as the cover of an action-adventure mag, Waldman's beautiful painting surpasses them all with ease. One thing, tho . . . isn't that robot a fugitive from *Forbidden Planet*? He looks an awful lot like Robby. . . .

Waldman also did a commendable job of interior illustrating. I certainly hope he's now a regular.

I was glad to see last issue that you were not pressing the usual 3-short novel format too forcefully and now that I've read Ivar Jorgenson's "Thunder Over Starhaven," I can easily see why! Exceedingly well-written, as was "This World Must Die." Just one thing bothers me, tho. And that is the organization of Thurdan's guard system. My gosh, he would have been assassinated overnight if he'd been relying on those two dumb robots to stave off the prowlers. Mantell got by just too easily to be convincing. Otherwise, I can't find a thing to scream about.

Also like "Earth Aflame!" very much. Plot was simple but made up for by the action which was actually *interesting*. I get so sick of the million and one chase scenes where the chase and chased do nothing but return blaster-shots for a seemingly endless number of pages. Thankfully, Warner took the time to work the many situations out into interesting and absorbing predicaments for our hero to work himself out of. Which was why the end came all too quickly.

Farrell's "We Learn Fast" tickled me no end. Fuornot probably later on persuaded the Martians to sub to *Infinity*

& SFA so they, too, could become monsters of distinction. (*Hm. I checked our mailing list and found no Martian addresses. Maybe they have a forwarding service, though.—LTS*)

"The Gates of Pearl" was a direct rehash of Kurt Vonnegut's "Thanasphere," only the ending was not half as good. Oh, well, one clunker out of four isn't so bad, especially when it's a mere short story.

Thank Ghu "The Fan-Space" is back. We just couldn't do without that. Please don't let its absence become a habit. Cut out the editorial, the lettercol, the covers . . . but keep "The Fan-Space"! (*Now look what you did! No editorial this issue. I'll wind up dueling with Destiny yet!—LTS*)

For potential authors, I'd sure like to see some work by Robert Sheckley and Chad Oliver, both of whom are my very utmost favorites. *Especially* Chad Oliver. And if anybody disagrees with me on *that*, they can prepare for a long and lengthy argument. (*Got a real great Sheckley coming in the March Infinity, and will see what I can do about Oliver. But what's this "long and lengthy" bit?—LTS*)

From the art standpoint, I'm

always plugging for Finlay. And more Waldman covers please.—Bill Meyers, 4301 Shawnee Circle, Chattanooga 11, Tennessee.

Would you please tell me if any back issues of *Infinity* and/or SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES are available. Thank you.—Brad Daigle, 1854 Cambridge, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

(Glad you asked. It happens we've just set up a back issue department. You can obtain all back issues of SFA, and all but the first Infinity, by writing to Back Issues, Royal Publications, Inc., 11 West 42nd Street, New York 36, New York. The price is 35¢ each, three for \$1.00. If your order totals less than \$1.00, please add 5¢ per magazine for postage and handling; if it's a dollar or more, we pay the costs.—LTS)

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Bought your Oct. ish of SFADVENTURES last week, and read every word in the whole mag. I really devoured (and no comments on my appetite, please!) the Jorgenson story, but that "Earth Aflame!", tho basically a good plot, left me very frustrated indeed. Migosh all that "hide and go

seek" was enuf to drive a body crazy. I kept thinking "When in the heck is that female going to look out the window (or screen if you prefer) and see what she's been missing!"

As one female reading about another person of her sex, I took it rather amiss for her to be so gosh-awful dumb. Don't get me wrong, I don't go for the Amazon type woman either, but I don't think we females should be painted in such colors.

"Gates of Pearl" was kinda funny, and "We Learn Fast" said a mouthful; isn't it a shame that it is so true?

Your other three columns are really to your credit. "Fan-Space" gives out info that is extremely helpful to us fans of sf, and all your little comments in your "Readers' Space" are amusing and informative at the same time. Your mag rates my 35¢ any month I find it on the stands. Some day when my kids don't take up all my money, I'll get me a subscription, so help me george.

Sorry to step on anyone's toes, but do think your April cover was better; altho I don't care for the monster theory, and like the robot in its stead.—Joan Cleveland, 608 South Second Street, Vineland, New Jersey.

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